

# THE LITTLE HILLS



NANCY HUSTON BANKS



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THE LITTLE HILLS







# THE LITTLE HILLS

BY

NANCY HUSTON BANKS

AUTHOR OF "OLDFIELD" AND "ROUND ANVIL ROCK"

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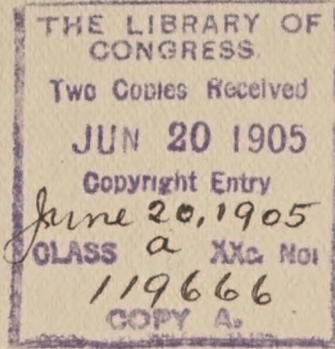
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TO MY FATHER



"The mountains also shall bring peace: and the  
little hills righteousness unto the people."

—SONGS OF DAVID.



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# THE LITTLE HILLS

## I

### PHŒBE

THE air was the breath of spice pinks. Wide borders of them wound around all the low beds, and the old garden lay just on the other side of the whitewashed fence. For this was a long time ago, near the middle of the last century. Then it was far down in a remote corner of the green earth; where some of the sweet old things and many of the simple old ways lasted longer than almost anywhere else; where a few of them linger yet, even as late as this very day.

It was in June, too — on sunniest of June days — with a soft wind blowing over the borders and every border in fullest bloom. That spicy sweetness had been Phœbe's delight ever since she could remember. As a lonely, fanciful child she had learned to watch for the gray buds — these glittering points — which always sprang up almost as early as the first bluebird's



## The Little Hills

song awoke the spring. As a more lonely and fanciful girl she sometimes left her uncle for a moment, and ran into the garden to see how fast the little steel spears were marching summerward, how soon they would unfurl their scented pennants. As a most lonely and fanciful woman the scent of the spice pinks had gradually become to her the very fragrance of all that she had missed in life. But she did not know it. Of a contented, cheerful spirit she was not conscious of missing anything and hardly knew that she was lonely.

Indeed she was not thinking of the pinks at all just then, nor of the roses and honeysuckles either, though they were blooming too in an exquisite tangle overhead, quite covering the porch on which she sat alone. She had given them only one hasty, anxious glance on coming out, uncertain whether they really were thick enough to keep her from being seen. With all her troubled heart she hoped so. She would not have ventured to come out had it not been so warm indoors that she could not think — and there was great need that she should think long and hard. After all that she had gone through during that dragging summer day, she



## Phœbe

felt that she could not bear to have another neighbor come at this late hour, and try to turn her from doing what she held herself bound to do. She was not in the least afraid of being turned, but she was very much afraid of being scolded. Then the worst of it was that she had not one single word to say in her own defence. It had been hard to make a silent, passive, yet unyielding resistance to quicker minds and readier tongues, throughout that endless day. And it was all the harder because she knew how kind the neighbors were and how good their motives; knew that they all loved her and felt a sort of tender responsibility for her welfare. They had always felt that because she was an orphan and they had grown used to telling her what to do, and what to leave undone when a child. For she was a gentle, reliant little thing, the nature that everybody naturally undertakes to guide. Moreover, these true friends never had realized that she was no longer a child — nor even a girl — but a woman full grown. She had hardly realized the fact herself till now when everything was suddenly changed and could never again be as it had been.



## The Little Hills

Mercifully it was nearly over. The sun was slowly sinking behind the hills at last. And then most of the good people had already come and gone—for a moment she could not think of any one who had not. Even Arabella, the Argonaut's lady, who rarely paid attention to anything except her own affairs which were always urgent and important, had tripped airily in on her high heels with her pink ribbons flying to make a gay protest. She had smilingly declared that if this absurd plan were carried out, Phœbe would never have a penny to buy herself anything pretty to wear. And, to Arabella's mind, there could be no more convincing argument than that. Phœbe could not help smiling in spite of her distress. Yes, even old Mrs. Crabtree, her aunt, had strolled lazily up the big road under the shade of the trees, to laugh at instead of scolding her, since she herself never took anything seriously, and this situation and the excitement over it seemed to her rather more amusing than most things. The drawl with which she spoke was comical enough and Phœbe laughed a little with her soft brown eyes full of tears, but without giving way one hair's breadth.



## Phœbe

“Well,” old Mrs. Crabtree had drawled, looking over her spectacles as she always did when she wanted to see better; “there seems to be nothing more to say. You haven’t said one blessed thing. You haven’t given any reason for tying this millstone around your own foolish little neck. You won’t even get mad—or talk back—and all the time I can no more move you than a rock. Yes, I suppose I’d just as well be going home.”

Saying this she had arisen with her usual air of indifference and sauntered off down the big road, keeping in the shade of the trees and taking time a-plenty to stop whenever she liked and lean on the fences, and look in through the open windows and doors.

Of course Phœbe had gone with her to the gate and as she stood looking after her with a troubled gaze, she thought that there was a sudden movement of Mrs. Pottle’s window curtains. That lady who was usually more than ready to meet anybody had, nevertheless, been known to avoid old Mrs. Crabtree, when that might be done with dignity—that is to say without any public display of the white feather. Remembering this Phœbe had thought it likely



## The Little Hills

that the squire's worthy wife was now peeping to see the enemy go by; that she was only waiting to make sure that the way was clear before coming herself. With this poor little Phœbe had turned and fled to the house in a panic. The first instinct of her helpless alarm had been to close the door and lock it. For meeting Mrs. Pottle was the ordeal most to be feared in all that she would have to face and stand against. But she had known that shutting the front door and even locking it would do no good, since that faithful friend would certainly come round the back way. Then she was almost breathless from fatigue and worry and the weather was warm; so that the door was left open and after a while she forgot all about it and about the ordeal as well. Then later — still forgetting — the faint wandering breeze had drawn her out to sit on the porch under the cool vines.

She was too deeply absorbed now in thought to notice that the sunbeams were still on the wing. They had faded from gold into silver and were slowly waning to mere shadows. Yet they still flew through the flowers and leaves at the faintest touch of the breeze. Fluttering



## Phœbe

down to the porch floor like shadowy flocks of spirit butterflies, they hovered over her little slippers with the narrow black ribbons crossed over the white stockings; trembled up her mourning skirt to alight on her tightly clasped hands and quiver about her sad, sweet face. But she did notice how slowly the twilight was falling and wistfully looked across the big road where the parsonage stood; lifting her clouded eyes to the tall chimney hoping that the swallows were beginning to circle above it. Then she sighed, knowing that it was only with the other mysterious shadows of evening that these mysterious shadow-birds circled with slanting wings, circling in ever narrowing circles, till they dropped silently down into their dark resting-place with other mysteries of night.

But in truth the risk that somebody could see her seemed rather slight after all. For the house itself could barely have been seen at a short distance down the big road. A giant elm stretched its mighty arms clear over the roof, high above the many other trees. Then the moss-grown roof was small as well as low and the wooden wall quite overrun by a tangle of



## The Little Hills

green. The creepers had wrought beauty with patience through many tranquil years. They had ranged one row of shining leaves above another till the crumbling boards were covered with living green, and shone and rippled in emerald waves whenever the sun was bright and the wind blew. Thus borne slowly upward on the steadily rising tide of verdure the tireless climbers had made the mossy roof greener with every spring, till they reached the broken chimney-top. But there the strongest and boldest had long, long ago been compelled to turn back, since it could neither advance nor linger. For that is one of the Laws of Life. Nothing alive shall ever stand still or even pause for an instant. Everything that lives must always go on or go back. Be it material or mental or spiritual, while living it must always go forward or backward—always either upward or downward. That is an appalling thing for us human creatures to know, seeing how little we achieve. And these groping tendrils so bent down had blindly laid hold on the poor little pillars of the poor old porch—as we in our turn lay hold on what we can reach—and after wreathing them with new



## Phœbe

strength and beauty had gone on weaving as the years went by, till they had finally woven this wonderful curtain of foliage and flowers which Phœbe was now hiding behind.

In a sudden fright she started up hastily, glancing round and thinking that she heard voices. In another moment she knew that the sound came from the parsonage and then she saw the flutter of something white. It was merely the snowy napkin which covered a small earthenware jar, slightly moved by the breeze. As her clouded eyes fell upon it a quick smile lit her sad face. She was naturally light-hearted and fond of fun and there had been a comical dispute over that little yeast-jar — such a small matter to raise such a large commotion. There were dimples in her smooth cheeks as she recalled the solemn indignation with which Mrs. Pottle had regarded the placing of that yeast-jar on the post of the parsonage front gate, as a deliberate personal affront to herself and a premeditated insult to the whole congregation. The new minister had to be sure said that his aunt, who kept house for him as he was unmarried, set the yeast-jar on the gate-post, simply and solely because it was the only sunny



## The Little Hills

spot about the parsonage. But he had laughed like a boy in saying it, and so had made the matter still worse in Mrs. Pottle's opinion. Phœbe's soft brown eyes were dancing and her pretty dimples were playing by this time. But her face grew sober soon enough. She could not think of the new minister yet without a pang. And then thinking of Mrs. Pottle again reminded her that this good friend who was almost like a mother and the hardest of all to resist, had not yet come and certainly would do so before the sinking sun went down.

Then the soft brown eyes clouded at once with intense thought. There was much to think over, much to consider. For ways and means were yet to be considered, though she had quite decided what she would do. Phœbe was not at all the kind of woman who waits to know *how* she can do what she believes to be right, before making up her mind that she *will* do it. She must have been some other than herself in order to hesitate simply because she could not see her way. And indeed the woman who decides before she considers, whose strength is of the heart and spirit rather than of the mind and body, is hard to daunt and harder to



## Phœbe

defeat, for the simple reason that she does not readily see material obstacles and hardly ever knows when she is beaten. Oh no, there was no doubt or hesitation whatever in Phœbe's perplexity. She was only very tired and very much at a loss how to get the neighbors to leave her alone and free to think. There it was again — that murmur of voices — and from the opposite direction surely. Starting forward in her fright she pushed the vines aside rather recklessly. The glow of the sunset fell full on her curly brown head which was almost as brown as her eyes. Nothing could be browner than they were, with those lovely shadows round them and those long, bewitching lashes that threw the shadows on her flushed cheeks which were brown too, most delicately, most exquisitely brown like the deep heart of a tea-rose. Indeed there was about her rounded little figure, her quick way of turning her pretty little head, her quickness and lightness in every movement something very like a wren, a brown little house-wren. She had a good deal of the wren's nature also for she was naturally brisk, cheery, busy and nearly always happy. It was not often that she sat like this, still and idle



## The Little Hills

with wistful eyes and saddened face. Even this brief respite was already bringing back some of her bright serenity. And all would be well with her very soon—if only—if only no one else would come just yet; if only everybody would stay away so that she might have quiet and peace to think; time at least to muster some excuse for what she was about to do, for she could not give the only excuse that she had. Oh! oh! if they all only would stay away and leave her alone for a little while! She knew how kind they meant to be, but she could not bear the kindest mention of her trouble. Every word that they had spoken, every question that they had asked, all in the most unselfish kindness had been torture—torture as unbearable as blows on an unhealed wound.

Cautiously leaning forward her troubled gaze searched the big road. This single street of the little town along which the old houses straggled under the older trees, ran by her front gate with but a narrow strip of turf between it and the sunken stone steps of her porch. She could see far down it as her house stood on a hill. Nobody was in sight



## Phœbe

and there had been no passing for more than an hour. But she knew that it could not be long before the neighbors would come out, for it was very near the time when they always did. Some of them liked to stroll up and down the big road, stopping now and then to lean over the whitewashed fences, or over the green front gates to chat with one another. Others were content to sit before their own open doors and hail the passers-by with news of the crops and the uneventful happenings that made up the interest of their lives. None of them had any interest beyond the wide circle within the misty hills. Few of them even knew any wider world than this quiet one that all could see, between the daily rising and setting of the sun. Most of them were born there where they lived, and were to die under the same greening roof-trees at the peaceful close of their useful, honored days. Surely, surely, it would seem that here — among people like these and lives like theirs — if anywhere in this strange world, there could be little reserve and no concealment. Yet we all know that under another Law of Life there are moments in the simplest, openest lives when the most open-hearted



## The Little Hills

must shrink from the most tender-hearted. Each one of us, simple and subtle alike, has known some crucial moment when the soul must go alone into its own inner temple leaving the most loved and loving outside.

And this moment had come now to poor little Phœbe for the first time in her confiding, trusting life. She did not know what it was but she felt the crisis. It was always her lot to feel many things that she never could comprehend. She knew only that she should not let any one tell her what to do now, that she would have to think and act for herself. That was what she was trying to do, but she was unused to thinking for herself and she was very tired and very, very much frightened. No wonder then that she drew still farther into the green dimness and put down an unsteady little hand to keep her black skirt from moving ever so slightly in the breeze.

Would the sun never go down behind the hills? Would the wan sunbeams never cease fluttering among the leaves and flowers? Would the swallows never begin circling around the parsonage chimney? With a sigh her wistful gaze wandered down and fell on



## Phœbe

one of the upper windows of the parsonage. A man was writing beside a table. She did not see his face — nor need to. It was the new minister. She knew his broad shoulders and looked away quickly. But not quite quickly enough to keep her heart from aching with the pain that most of us have felt on seeing a stranger in the place of a friend. Not yet could she calmly see John Wood in the place of William Rowan. In order not to see him again she got up hurriedly and walked to the other end of the porch. As she drew back the vines and looked far down the big road her heart seemed to give a leap and then fall back. For two ladies were coming straight toward her house, and she strained her eyes to see who they were. The road was overhung by the low branches of the trees that lined it and by the tall shrubs that bent over the bordering fences. But presently when they drew nearer and came into a clearer space, she saw that one was Mrs. Pottle and the other the widow Wall. Instantly she knew that they were on their way to see her and shuddered and shrunk back, knowing only too well what they were coming for.

She turned and moved toward the open door



## The Little Hills

in haste that was almost flight. Again she felt her first impulse, to run away, to go inside and lock everybody out, barring even the back door. It was her own house and she lived alone. No one could come in if she should refuse to open the door. But on the threshold she paused and stood still. There was no use in trying to escape this last and worst ordeal. It could only be put off. She would be forced to meet it sooner or later. The latest could not be longer than the morrow. Her door must be opened early on the next morning to receive her guests. And so she went slowly back to her seat feeling almost relieved, as a child does when he sees punishment near and longs to get it over. But she could not help shrinking and quivering at the first murmur of their voices. For she knew what they were talking about though she could not hear the words. She could see them now quite distinctly and there was something so like them both in the very way they walked, that the shadow of a smile suddenly crossed her distressed face. There was even a quick, unconscious flutter of dimples under the big tears rolling down her cheeks.



## II

### AN OFFICIAL VISIT

OF course the squire's lady led by a pace, laying down the law over her shoulder, while the widow Wall followed agreeing — till she got a chance to disagree. That is the way they had gone through life ever since they had started to the same school on the same day. For Mrs. Pottle often owned that they were about the same age, though she never failed to add that she hardly expected anybody to believe it.

In truth nature as well as circumstances had given her the advantage. She was good-looking, large, strong, energetic, and with resolution in every line and movement of her powerful body. Her friend was far from good-looking, unreasonably tall, languid, thin, mild — as a rule — and limply irresolute even in the matter of a figure. Moreover to make the contrast



## The Little Hills

still greater just now, the breeze caught Mrs. Pottle's skirts which seemed to be starched even more stiffly than usual, and blew them out till she looked a good deal larger than she really was. But there was no sort of uncertainty about the size of the place which she occupied in the community. That was much larger than any one else's. Indeed it had been said that when she took cold the whole neighborhood sneezed. And if this was true it was little enough for the neighbors to do, in view of all that she was always doing for everybody, no matter whether anybody wanted her to do it or not. But unfortunately the public is not much more grateful for undesired kindness than the individual. So that many of this good woman's unselfish and untiring efforts for the general welfare went unrewarded even by appreciation, and were often cruelly misunderstood. The unkindest cuts of all had come from old Mrs. Crabtree who never cared what she said so long as the listeners laughed. For this game-making old lady was fully — and perhaps a little proudly — aware of the tradition that she was somewhat of a wit. And that is a reputation hard to keep up anywhere without



## An Official Visit

unkindness. It must be whetted continually upon everything in reach if it be kept sharp, and no whetstone is so ready and handy as human nature. Here in this quiet place there was nothing whatever for old Mrs. Crabtree to whet hers on, except the simple neighbors and their quaint ways. Mrs. Pottle merely suffered with the rest but rather more frequently because she had no saving sense of humor, which might sometimes have withheld temptation from this heartless game-maker. She used often to say to the widow Wall, almost with tears in her eyes, that no tongue ever could tell all that she had put up with from old Mrs. Crabtree, solely for Phœbe's sake.

"Ten to one but she's already backed her up in this very thing, just to make it harder for me," said Mrs. Pottle, over her shoulder. "For you know — as well as I do, Jane — that *she* don't really care one mite *what* Phœbe or anybody does unless it's something to laugh at and make fun of."

There was no reply from the widow Wall. None was needed or expected. Her mere presence was all that her self-reliant friend required. A born leader like Mrs. Pottle must



## The Little Hills

have a follower, an admiring and applauding one if possible, and the fewer opinions that follower has of her own the better. This humble soul though not very quick-witted, had long ago found out the fact, and of late years it was only by queer fits and starts that she ventured to assert herself. As far back as she could remember she had given up to Mandy Pottle. With a weak nature the force of habit is stronger in the long run than inclination. Then in this case submission had its substantial rewards. The squire was the richest man in the whole country, and his wife was most generous to those who did what she wished them to do. And the widow Wall was doing it now as nearly as she could by going with her "to save Phœbe at the eleventh hour," as Mrs. Pottle had said in a solemn whisper. This happened to be one of the few matters in which the widow Wall really did agree with her friend. It must be admitted that she never would have thought of going, of taking any active measures, or indeed, of doing anything at all. But she was quite willing to go when Mrs. Pottle asked her to, and so it was that they were now on their way.



## An Official Visit

The usually serious state of Mrs. Pottle's mind grew more serious with every step, and the ordinarily severe expression of her honest face, had never been more severe than it was when they reached Phœbe's front gate.

A single glimpse of its grimness made her heavy heart sink still lower, but she went to meet them with such courage as was hers to muster. She shook hands and managed to murmur something about its being cooler on the porch. The ladies sat down in the chairs that she placed for them in the coolest spot beneath the vines. The next step according to polite custom was to invite them to take off their bonnets. But as she moved mechanically to give the customary invitation she suddenly noticed that they were both wearing sun-bonnets, and the fact meant so much that she shrunk back and stood still, trembling and afraid to speak or move.

For these ladies were by birth and breeding of the highest social position, notwithstanding that the widow Wall was too poor to be a leader of fashion, and the squire's lady much too busy with the public welfare. Consequently both of them had what they called dress-bonnets



## The Little Hills

for wear upon proper and pleasant occasions, as all ladies of standing then had in that country. The squire's wife always wore a handsome beaver in the winter and an elegant leghorn in the summer, those being the finest and most modish materials that she knew anything about. The widow Wall on the other hand always wore the leghorn in winter and the beaver in summer, not because she preferred them out of season, but because she got them when her friend was done with them and gave them to her. Their sunbonnets and those of the other leading ladies, were never worn outside their own yards, except under certain circumstances always more or less deplorable. They were worn frequently to funerals, and the wearing of them then was meant and taken as a subtle expression of sympathy quite beyond all consideration of appearances. Also they were occasionally worn on visits to the sick, but only when the whole family already knew how hopeless the case was. These were the sole exceptions, and no lady of the least social importance ever thought of such a thing as appearing on the big road in her sunbonnet unless something equally sad was happening,



## An Official Visit

had happened or was about to happen. This was all well known to Phœbe and the first sight of the sunbonnets would have alarmed her, had she not been too much agitated to notice them. It was no wonder then that she now stood helpless and dumb, almost frozen with fright.

But the widow Wall always an easy-going soul and rather absent-minded, was warm from walking and did not remember to wait for the invitation. She took off her sunbonnet at once without any sort of ceremony. And now gathering the crumpled crown in her thin hand, she began to fan herself with the flapping brim, as she swung comfortably back and forth in the low rocking-chair. Then she forgot again, and turning her kind face toward the garden, over which the scented breeze was blowing, she spoke with a smile:

“My! How sweet the borders do smell this evening. And the dew hasn’t begun to fall yet, either,” taking a deep breath. “Spice-pinks surely are the sweetest things that blow — and the liveliest.”

“They seem so to me too,” said Phœbe, quickly, eager to follow any topic that led away



## The Little Hills

from the one she feared. "It does seem as if the scent had wings and flew about with the birds. Sometimes when it hovers around—real close and friendly—as it has done to-day—"

She broke off suddenly and turned with a start to look at Mrs. Pottle. The widow Wall also turned and looked, sitting up very straight and holding her bonnet quite still and as stiff as its lack of starch would allow. For both of them understood that severe clearing of Mrs. Pottle's throat. They knew that it meant disapproval when it did not mean displeasure. And they took it now as a stern rebuke, reminding them that this was no fit time for idle talk about flowers or any other trivial matters.

That clearing of Mrs. Pottle's throat always awed the widow Wall into silence as it did many others much less timid than she was. And it told Phœbe that there was no hope beyond a momentary delay. For a moment she hesitated in alarmed confusion, and then she remembered the fresh water which was always offered to visitors. That would serve to stave off the dreaded moment for a few minutes longer, and so murmuring an apology she ran



## An Official Visit

out to the well. Not a word was spoken while the long well-sweep swept down very slowly, and crept up again more slowly still with its plaintive, complaining sound. And neither of the visitors said anything except to murmur thanks when the crystal drink was fetched, dripping from the cool mossy bucket. But they both took a delicate sip—though they were not in the least thirsty—as politeness required of them in turn. Then the widow Wall set the glass back on the waiter which Phœbe held without looking up. And Mrs. Pottle also was careful when doing the same, not to let her own keen gray eyes meet the soft brown ones which were seeking them in mute entreaty. She had met that gaze of Phœbe's ere this and had been disarmed by it, when she had been almost as clear and firm in her duty as she was now. Bearing this in mind she did not look at Phœbe at all but instead looked straight and hard at the widow Wall, much to the discomfort of that mild lady who suddenly and hastily put on her sunbonnet—tying it tight under her pointed chin—as she now noticed with much embarrassment that Mrs. Pottle had not taken off hers.

For the taking off and the keeping on of



## The Little Hills

Mrs. Pottle's sunbonnet always let everybody know exactly what to expect. Perhaps its being so large and so white and so stiff may have had a good deal to do with its being so well understood by so many people for so many years. It certainly seems unlikely that any sunbonnet which was small and dingy and limp—like the widow Wall's for instance—ever could have ruled an entire community as Mrs. Pottle's large, white, stiff one did. At all events there was not a woman and hardly a man or child within its radius, but knew that when it came off there was still hope of its wearer's being coaxed and possibly dissuaded; that when it stayed on the situation was hopeless because its wearer was out in a strictly official capacity and not to be turned by her own or anybody else's feelings, from saying and doing what she conscientiously believed should be said and done. It was knowing this that now made Phoebe turn with a helpless, resigned sigh and go to the farthest seat and sit down, clasping her small brown hands to keep them from trembling so much.

“Well, Phoebe *Rowan*!” Mrs. Pottle demanded sternly forthwith without any beating



## An Official Visit

about, though still looking hard at the widow Wall.

The beginning was even worse than Phœbe's fears. She had never been called by her surname except to be scolded which was rarely for she had never before gone counter to any one's wishes, and was much loved. Then she was not used to hearing her new name which had been hers only a few weeks. At the strange sound of it her face flushed and her heart beat faster. But the flush was not a bride's happy blush and she could not have told whether the quickened beating of her heart came from pleasure or pain. Poor little Phœbe! The memory of her marriage and all concerning it was like some troubled dream that she could not recall distinctly. She had been trying hard ever since to see clearly but the harder she tried the more unreal everything seemed. And so not knowing what to say she waited in quivering silence, pleading only with her troubled eyes, for Mrs. Pottle's tone had been a question and even an arraignment.

But that determined lady was much too intent to wait for an answer and went on



## The Little Hills

without moving her stern gaze from the widow Wall's uneasy face. "Now, Phœbe, you know what I've come for quite as well as I do. And it will save trouble for you and me and everybody, if you will just speak out quickly and plainly and tell me the truth—right off the reel. There's no sense in any kind of shilly-shally, nor a bit of use either, for I mean to know. *Now* then! Is it true that you have written inviting that whole Rowan tribe to come here and live with you—on the little you've got in this old shell of a house?"

Phœbe hung her head in silence. She had nothing to say, no excuse to give nor even any explanation.

"Then it is true!" Mrs. Pottle accused.

The widow Wall sighed uneasily. It distressed her to see any one in trouble. Then she was uncomfortable herself being stared at so.

"Don't bother, Jane," said Mrs. Pottle, sharply. "And you've asked all of 'em," she added, speaking to Phœbe but looking harder than ever at the widow Wall.

"There are only two of them," pleaded Phœbe.



## An Official Visit

"Only two indeed!" repeated Mrs. Pottle, tartly. "And pray who are *they*?"

"Just his father and his wife," Phœbe faltered.

"Whose wife?" demanded Mrs. Pottle.

"*His* father's, William's stepmother," said Phœbe faintly, growing more nervous and frightened with every word.

"Land o' the living!" cried Mrs. Pottle. "Just listen to that, Jane Wall — if you please." She stared blankly for a moment doubting if she had heard aright. Then she went on: "And you've asked this old woman to come and live with you — when you've never laid eyes on her, don't know the first thing about her, and she isn't even your husband's mother."

"She was just as kind to him as if she had been," Phœbe forced herself to say, though she could not lift her brimming eyes. "He told me so over and over — — that's the reason."

"Her husband's stepmother," almost screamed Mrs. Pottle. "A *step*mother-in-law! Now I ask you again, Jane Wall — on your word of honor as a lady, if you ever heard of such a thing in all your born days?"



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"No, I *never*," retorted the widow Wall, with a sudden scared flash of spirit. "And what's more, it ain't *my* fault and you needn't look at me like that, either."

There was no sign that Mrs. Pottle heard though her gaze never once flickered. But when she spoke again after a moment's silence, it was with some little gentleness and patience. Perhaps she had seen how Phœbe was trembling though she tried her very best not to see.

"It would have been better if I had come sooner, as I thought of doing. The only reason I didn't was because it was my duty to give that aunt of yours one more chance to do hers. Of course I knew she wouldn't—no matter how much time she had. But her not doing *her* duty is no excuse for my not doing *mine*. That's why I waited till she had gone home."

At this she caught a sly twinkle in the widow Wall's eye and stiffened with indignation. But she did not deign to notice it by a word, and went on with a visible effort keeping to her tone of judicial calmness.

"And I certainly ought to have known just



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how she would do after all the tussles I've had with her all these years, trying to make her see what she owed you. And I shan't forget the sort of thanks I got, either;" tightening her lips and looking still more severely at the widow Wall. "But as I was saying — her not doing her duty *then* was no more excuse for my neglecting mine than it is *now*, — as I told her right to her face when she let you leave school to nurse your uncle, instead of doing it herself for her own brother, or having her daughter do it. Anne was through school — goodness knows."

Phœbe tried to say that she would never have been willing to let any one else nurse her uncle. She also strove to say that she was fond of her aunt who had always been most kind, but there was a moment's pause while she mustered courage to speak.

The widow Wall broke in excitedly and with a good deal of feeling: "For my part it always seems to me that Anne Crabtree is more to be pitied than blamed, poor down-trodden thing that's never been allowed to say her soul was her own. . . There's more people, too — that would keep other folks from saying so if they



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could, — people a-plenty that would make other folks live like toads under a harrow. And I'm never going to sit by and hear poor Anne blamed for what she can't help. No, I'm not — no matter what happens. So there!"

"Really, Jane," said Mrs. Pottle, icily. "I should be greatly obliged if you would not interrupt me. You have put what I was going to say clean out of my head. Oh — yes — I remember."

Then without once glancing at Phœbe whose welfare she had most sincerely at heart, and without the slightest doubt of being able to manage and settle the whole affair, as she had managed and settled the affairs of the neighborhood for many years, she took everything into her own ready and capable hands. She began by declaring the plan to be utterly impracticable and went into details to prove what she said. It was easy to do this, knowing every penny that Phœbe had, and where it came from and how it was spent. For all the neighbors knew all about each other's concerns and could not have helped knowing had they wished to do so. Indeed most of them would have thought it most un-neighborly — positively un-



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christian — to shirk such knowledge. Mrs. Pottle by virtue of her position as public guardian felt this even more strongly than the rest, especially when it concerned Phœbe whom she loved in much the same fussy, over-bearing way that she would have loved a daughter. The sad plight of her favorite suddenly fired all her old smouldering resentment against Mrs. Crabtree. Looking over the situation she saw plainly that it was the aunt who had been to blame from first to last. Phœbe had always been neglected, even in early childhood, but for what she herself could do. Turning back to a bitter day in midwinter she recalled catching a glimpse of the child flying down the big road after a mover's wagon, bare foot and bare head, with her brown curls blowing in the freezing wind, holding her little woollen hood in one hand and her shoes and stockings in the other. And there sat her aunt by the front window looking on without raising a finger to stop her, not saying a word, only smiling and clapping her hands as the little figure flew by, as much as to say: "Clip it, Phœbe. Clip it — for Mrs. Pottle's after you." And the little bare feet had clipped it so fast that she had not been



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able to overtake her in time to prevent the giving of the things to a shivering child in the wagon. But it was some satisfaction to remember — thinking of it now — that she had shaken her well right there in the middle of the big road under her aunt's very nose. Yes, she had always done what she could for the soft, foolish little thing. Her conscience was quite clear. Nevertheless it was a wonder that a child thus left to run wild ever should have lived to be grown, not any wonder that the same impulsive, unreasoning, misguided sympathy and generosity should have brought her to the present strait.

“Your wanting to do this wouldn't be so utterly out of the question if these old folks didn't have anybody of their own to take care of them,” Mrs. Pottle granted. “But the old lady has a daughter — well married too with a good home and husband —”

“That's the very reason,” said Phœbe, eagerly. The sudden sound of her own unsteady voice frightened her, but she bravely kept on with what she felt bound in justice to say: “Mother Rowan's daughter has written me a beautiful letter. I should like you to read it because it makes



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everything so clear. It says—so beautifully—how dearly she would love to have her mother come and live with her, that it is hard to get her own consent to let her live with any one else. But she can't do as she would like because her husband isn't willing for her to ask Father Rowan—who isn't any real kin,—and she thinks it would be wicked to part the old people."

"Does she, indeed!" cried Mrs. Pottle, sarcastically. "She's mighty high-minded to be sure. And so *that's* the way she has managed to shift her own burden to your shoulders! Well, I shall make it my business to see that it is shifted back again where it belongs. And I will do it this very night too—or know the reason why. Just as soon as the squire comes home to supper I shall ask him to write a letter that will settle the whole bother. Being a squire he knows how to lay down the law—I'm bound to say that much for him."

"No, no—please don't," entreated Phœbe. "I want them—"

"Now, just listen to me for a moment, child," Mrs. Pottle said almost gently; "you surely know by this time that I've only your good at heart."



## The Little Hills

“Indeed — indeed I do,” cried Phœbe looking up wistfully.

“Well, then you can’t suppose that I am going to allow you to saddle yourself with such an unheard-of burden as this,” said Mrs. Pottle. “My conscience won’t let me. I’m bound to interfere — since that aunt of yours won’t. Whatever she may do or not do, I am never going to sit still with my hands on my lap and let you saddle yourself for life with this preposterous load. And so once for all I tell you again that it is utterly out of the question, and will prove it to you. Even if the burden were rightfully yours — which it isn’t — you could not do what you are thinking of. In the first place you haven’t the room. There is only one bedroom in this little house, and you need that for yourself. In the second place you haven’t the means. It is just as much as you can do to get along without any one else. In the third—”

“Oh — yes, indeed there is plenty of room,” cried Phœbe so eager to seize this first chance to discuss the plan as a bare possibility, that she forgot to be afraid. “They are to have my room and I am to sleep in the shed-room. There isn’t even any need to put a cot in the



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parlor. I thought out that, just now — and so nearly everything is settled.”

“Well, ’pon my word!” exclaimed Mrs. Pottle, provoked out of the judicial calmness that she had striven to maintain. “And so you have been sitting there settling it have you? while I have been talking and trying my best to keep your silly head out of a noose. I do think in my heart, Phœbe, that you are certainly the most aggravating creature alive. You never talk back and never dispute and never even argue. You just sit there with your big eyes wide open looking as if you didn’t know your own mind — and the whole time you have no more idea of giving up than flying.”

She paused for lack of words to express the righteous indignation that she felt, and turning suddenly looked at Phœbe for the first time. There was something in the sweet downcast face, and in the dispirited droop of the little black-clad figure that touched her. Accordingly she hastily turned her gaze upon the widow Wall once more, and with increased severity because she must go on scolding Phœbe.

“Sometimes the mild, silent way you hold to what you mean to do makes me think of the



## The Little Hills

gossamer that perplexes and vexes me so among my roses. It is so fine that I can scarcely see it and so soft that I can barely feel it. I can't even get hold of it to break it or pull it off — and there it stays too — no matter what I do."

Phœbe looked up shyly with a confused smile not quite sure whether she was still being scolded or not, and then she exchanged a friendly glance with the widow Wall.

Seeing this glance Mrs. Pottle felt the necessity of greater firmness on her own part. "There's no use in bandying any more words," she said conclusively. "The squire shall write that letter this very night — and that's all there is about it."

"No," said Phœbe, with a new note of firmness in her gentle tones. "He must not write — you must not ask him to. Nobody must interfere. I — I must not allow it. Then — they are already on the way. They will be here to-morrow morning in the stage."

For a moment surprise and anger held Mrs. Pottle silent, then she said: "Well, they can go back again — after they have had a little visit — and it needn't be a long one either as I soon shall give them to understand."



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Phœbe arose very slowly and stood very straight and although her soft voice trembled it did not break. "No, you must not say or even hint anything of the kind. No one ever shall wound their feelings by word or look. They are not coming to make a visit. They are coming to live with me. This is to be their home as long as they live—or wish to stay—just as much their home hereafter as mine."

At these words Mrs. Pottle also arose. She was more deeply offended than she would have thought it possible that she ever could be with Phœbe. And then she was more completely defeated than she had ever been before in all her well-meant interference with the affairs of the whole neighborhood.

"Very well—then there's nothing more for me to say," she said stiffly. "After this I can go with a clear conscience. Nothing that happens can be laid at my door. But you needn't look to me for help no matter what comes. And after all *this* isn't the fault of that aunt of yours. For you have deliberately brought the whole trouble on yourself and you can't deny it. It's bad enough to be a widow



## The Little Hills

when a body can't help it, but to go and be one *on purpose*, as you've done — ”

“ Well, I must say you are not very polite, Mandy Pottle ! ” cried the widow Wall, flaring up. “ I should just like to know what you mean by that. Bad enough to be a widow, indeed ! I can let you know that in all these many years that *I've* been a widow, this is the very first time that *my* being one has ever been thrown up to *me*. ” The words ended in a burst of tears.

“ Pooh ! ” said Mrs. Pottle not unkindly. “ Come along, Jane. Don't be silly. Let's be going home. There is nothing here to stay for. I don't feel bound by my conscience to allow myself to be treated with any more disrespect. ”

Phœbe ran to her and clung round her begging to be forgiven. “ Please — please — don't go, dear Mrs. Pottle, for you know I love you. I can't bear your going away angry with me. Forgive me. You have always been so kind — so good. I can't remember when you were not. Don't you see that I can't do anything else — in this. Indeed, indeed I can't. I must at least try to do what I think is right — or my



## An Official Visit

heart will break. Won't you help me? You have never yet refused."

Under the little clinging, trembling hands, the soft words, the sweet looks and the mist of tears in the brown eyes, Mrs. Pottle's anger was melting as fast as a flurry of snow under warm sunshine. But feeling that she could not in dignity allow the air to clear quite so quickly, she turned sharply to ask the widow Wall if she had the remotest notion what she was crying about. Yet while speaking she was carefully straightening that aggrieved lady's sunbonnet with a tenderness which was taken as the ample apology it was meant to be. The widow Wall accordingly dried her eyes and the two ladies then bade Phœbe good night. There was a lingering touch of reserve in Mrs. Pottle's manner but not a trace of resentment. And Phœbe sighed with relief when they set out down the big road through the gathering dusk. The worst was over now.



### III

#### PHŒBE'S PLIGHT

HER heart sprang up at once as it always did with the removal of any weight. There was nothing more to dread — only ways and means to think of. And the greatest difficulty was already overcome. She had found a way to give the old people the only bedroom she had. At first it had seemed as if she would have to put them in the parlor to sleep, or set her own cot behind the screen as she had done for a long time during her uncle's illness. She would gladly have given them the parlor, had it been as comfortable as the bedroom, and she would willingly have slept there herself. But in either case there must have been risk of their noticing the makeshift and so being made to feel that the house was too full. That would have grieved her and it was a great relief to have this most important point well



## Phœbe's Plight

settled. It was pretty to see how her clouded face brightened at the thought. Yes, they could have the best room in the house—the only bedroom—without a sign of crowding, since she had been able to squeeze her own little bed into the small shed-room on the end of the porch. She would never have believed it could be done, if she had not happened to think of measuring the space with a ribbon just the length of the bed, and so found it exactly long enough. She fairly beamed thinking of it now. Then how lucky that the house-wrens had reared their brood and flown away! They had built in a deserted wasp's nest which she had found and hung up inside the shed-room window because she thought it pretty, without knowing that it was like an old ivory carving. And Jenny Wren had not minded her coming as often as two or three times a day on tiptoe to take a smiling peep. She had never ruffled a brown feather—merely holding her pretty brown head on one side, and looking down with her bright brown eyes—very much as Phœbe held hers looking up with her soft brown ones. But visiting and living together are entirely different things—



## The Little Hills

as some of us learn too late,—and Phœbe thought it just as well that Jenny had no further use for the shed-room.

It was really a nice little room as she said to herself happily planning this and that. The walls had been whitewashed till they were like the driven snow. There was space for a little table and a chair. She forgot that the chair would have to be set out on the porch whenever the door was open. What matter—what more could any one want! The muslin curtains were nearly as white as the narrow bed—all so fresh and sweet. Then roses were blooming around the window so close that they might perhaps awaken her—when the wind of the dawn swayed them—by sprinkling dew-drops in her face. She was full of innocent fancies as the gentle lonely are apt to be. And she loved her flowers as a nature so loving as hers must love insensate things when it has nothing of its very own—not one human creature—better worthy of love. She was especially fond of the spice-pinks and it was pleasant to know that they need not be taken up till they were quite done blooming. After their first fullness it would



## Phœbe's Plight

then be early enough to plant late vegetables. Yet she sighed almost in the same breath, knowing that she must give them up sooner or later, because there would be need of more room for vegetables now that her family was larger. She could only hope that the old gentleman and the old lady did like vegetables. Suppose they did not! What if they should require things — many things — that she could not get for them. For a moment her heart which had grown tranquil throbbed again with fresh alarm. If only she knew something about them and had ever so slight an acquaintance with their likes and dislikes! Then she put the fear behind her, turning quickly back to her serene trust that all would be well. Calmly she went on thinking and planning. But it is hard to think steadily, to hold our thoughts in one direction when the mind is weary and the heart heavy. Her thoughts would wander backward in spite of all she could do. She still tried to send them forward but instead they again turned back, straying farther and farther till they wandered lost in the past.

The memories that thronged first were not



## The Little Hills

very sad and she could scarcely have told why her eyes slowly filled with painless tears. Maybe it was the wailing cry of the whip-poor-will — uneasy wraith of music — coming from the dim willows that murmured with the little brook through the shadowed meadow. Maybe it was the wistful gleam of the fireflies — uncertain as life's bright gleams — glimmering amid the gray mists that drifted over the darkened fields. Or maybe it was some simple home sound that the soft wind brought from the drowsy households. For nothing can ever be sadder or sweeter than these home sounds heard at nightfall by the homeless and the lonely.

But Phœbe was neither of these. This small house which had been her uncle's home had been hers also, far longer than she could remember. On his death more than a year before it had become her own with all its roses and honeysuckles and its sweet old garden. As for being lonely, she was used to that, and was not more so now than she had been ever since she could recollect. Living alone with her uncle who had been an invalid for years, she had never had time to think of loneliness



## Phœbe's Plight

nor, indeed, of herself at all. She knew nothing about hiring a stranger to do what she did for him or any part of it. The very thought of such a thing would have shocked and distressed her as heartless neglect of a natural duty. And so it seems to a good many old-fashioned people living to-day where she lived more than a half century ago. Beginning as a child she had gone on doing her best till she had reached girlhood and passed into womanhood, giving her whole life to the care of her uncle so that she had not known at first what to do when he died. For the heaviest burden may grow so gradually and be borne so long, that the bearer hardly knows how to live without it. Those of us who have faithfully bent our shoulders should know how Phœbe felt—how utterly at a loss and how restlessly unhappy she had been—when hers was lifted at last. If we have been faithful and loving in bearing our own burdens we must know how hard it was at first for her to sit idle for an instant without feeling that she was neglecting something that should be done. If truly faithful and loving in long service we know that many sad nights must have gone by before Phœbe



## The Little Hills

could sleep one night through without starting up again and again, fearful that she had slept too long leaving urgent duties undone. Ah! that half-awakened springing to the tired feet: that hurried, remorseful beating of the burdened heart! Yes, the most faithful and loving among us can well believe that poor little Phœbe, alone in that desolate house, awoke more than once to find herself bending over the empty bed, so white in the moonlight, so smooth and so cold.

No wonder then that she had been quick and eager to help when William Rowan, the minister, and her nearest neighbor living in the parsonage just across the big road, needed nursing. He had fallen ill almost immediately after coming to take charge of the church. In truth he had been ill for years before but did not know it, because his illness was the one which — mercifully — the afflicted are always the last to know. And there had been no outward sign of the disease then, at least nobody noticed any. His trial sermon was a good one and there was only one dissenting voice when he was called. Mrs. Pottle alone objected and she did so on another score than his health.



## Phœbe's Plight

She had said quite openly — as indeed she always did everything — that it was tempting providence to call a preacher who had no wife; trouble was sure to come of it sooner or later. And although she had consented at last — that of course since there could have been no calling of any minister without her consent — she had not changed her opinion. Naturally then when William Rowan became ill almost immediately with nobody to take care of him, she spoke of the timely warning that she had given. But she did not let him hear and she was among the first to come to his relief. Indeed the whole community, everybody in the church and out of it, had vied with one another in kindness to the stricken stranger. But Phœbe had done more than all the rest put together. All the ladies, even the squire's wife, had willingly given way to her with kind looks that she did not see, saying out of her hearing that perhaps she would not be so lost without her uncle, now that she had some one else to nurse.

And so it had begun. Not many days had passed before William Rowan could tell her light, swift footsteps from all the others that hastened to serve him. His sunken eyes soon



## The Little Hills

followed her trim little figure as it moved softly about the shadowed room, and sometimes he almost forgot the pain in smiling at the deftness of her noiseless little hands. She saw that he liked her best, that he wanted her beside him constantly. And seeing it made her feel still more sorry that she could not like him better that she could only pity him with all her tender heart. It seemed to her almost wicked not to like your own minister, and yet she knew that she never would have liked William Rowan at all had he been well. Then—remembering that he never could be—her soft heart smote her so that she grew very tender toward him; more tender than she knew or meant. So that one day when they were left alone together, he took her hand which was smoothing his pillow, and told her that he loved her and asked her to marry him just as soon as he should be “well and strong”—poor fellow. Poor, poor fellow!

She had not been able to help shrinking, the shock was too great. But she had made no effort to take away her hand—his was so weak that she had not the heart. It was all so heartrending that she hardly could bear



## Phœbe's Plight

it. At the sound of a coming step he let her go and she turned hastily to the window, thus hiding her tears till there was a chance to slip out of the chamber unseen.

This was in midwinter. Phœbe had not gone to the parsonage on the next morning, staying away for the first time. She sat hidden behind the window curtains sadly looking across the frozen big road, wondering what she should do. It was a gray day with a bitter wind driving the huddled clouds over the bleak fields of the sky like frightened sheep, and tossing their torn fleeces down to the bleaker earth. Life itself seemed grayest and bleakest of all. Her breast was aching with remorse for what she could not help. To think that in trying to relieve his suffering she had added a pang to what he already had to bear. Yet in this she was as helpless as he. Love does not come at will — nor go — even when pity calls and duty drives. She would have loved him if she could and she did try, — tried hard — while she shrank and shivered, looking piteously at his window till she was blinded by tears. For she wanted love as much as he. It was almost a relief to see



## The Little Hills

Mrs. Pottle coming to ask why she was not at her post and she had gone back to it because there was nothing else to do. When she had seen the havoc wrought in his stricken face by the night's misery, she prayed to be forgiven for not coming more quickly.

For a while afterward all had gone on as before except that Phœbe took care — feeling cruel and guilty — never to be left alone with him. But as the days and weeks had dragged by she had gradually ceased to fear. Now and then he had spoken of love and she had listened without fear. His voice was so weak that it was like listening to a spirit and he said nothing more of marriage, nothing more of getting well. He seemed to be at peace except for his anxiety about his father and mother. An accident to his father had prevented their coming with him and still kept them from his bedside.

“It was all arranged,” he had said miserably again one morning in early spring. “My mother was to keep house for me here in the parsonage. She has always been so kind that I don't like to call her my stepmother. And I had written her there was plenty of room. She



## Phœbe's Plight

is getting old now — it's my time to take care of her and I felt so glad and proud. Father isn't — he can't — I don't know what they will do —" then he turned his head restlessly more than once before murmuring that the Lord would provide. When he had found breath again after coughing he gasped that he *must* make haste and get well and strong.

"Yes, you must make haste and get well and strong," repeated Phœbe as steadily as she could.

And the widow Wall had turned quickly from the front window, where she sat hemming the fine sheets that old Mrs. Crabtree had sent for his bed, saying that *of course* he would soon be well now with spring almost come. Why, it was fully a month since the first bluebirds had begun warbling, and every sunny spot and all the sheltered nooks were already full of wild flowers.

"See these earliest ones in this tumbler — these fragile little ladies in their thin white frocks striped with pink — the fairies among the flowers," said Phœbe, trying to make him smile.

But when the shy wild flowers had given



## The Little Hills

place to the first proud roses; when the blue-birds were so many that the blue sky seemed bluer with their wings; when the rosy clover fields were alive with singing larks, William Rowan was still farther from being well and strong. He could not even lift his head to look out at the growing beauty of the green-ing, blossoming earth. The utmost that he could do was to turn his wasted face toward the flowering locust tree which waved long, white banners of fragrance before his open window.

And when it had come to this, Phœbe felt that her heart would surely break with pure compassion. It would have been less hard for her to see him as he was now if she could have loved him, for then she might have served him, as the others did, without self-reproach. A pang smote her whenever her sad eyes met his. If there were but something that she *could* do to ease that remorseful aching in her breast. At last when she could bear it no longer she had broken down and told him how she felt. They were alone and the quiet room was dim with gathering dusk, and sweet with the scent of the locust bloom. Phœbe looking



## Phœbe's Plight

at him through a mist of tears had tried to see if he knew how near the end was.

He had smiled at her: "Dear one! Loving you has been the one bright spot—the only happiness I could have had. It is all better—far better as it is—and I shall not struggle any more. For a long time it has been only for the sake of my father and mother. If I might know that they will not want—" then he waited for breath to go on again.

A sudden thought lit Phœbe's pale face: "Leave them to me," she whispered impetuously. "I haven't anybody of my own in the whole world. If you could think me worthy of the trust—it would take some of this pain out of my heart—and give me something to live for."

He shook his head gently and when he could speak—a word at a time—he said that his mother was very proud, of a most independent spirit. She could never be happy dependent upon any one. Through a hard life she had kept her independence—by the toil of her own hands—owing no one anything. With him it was different, he was like her own son. And there might have been a difference with



## The Little Hills

Phœbe too if — if there had been any real claim — to justify — to reconcile his mother's pride. Something like this he had said very slowly and softly. Phœbe could not recall the faint words quite distinctly. And all that came after was always confused in her memory. She remembered only offering to marry him then — at once — that very moment if that could give her the right to do what would bring him perfect peace. It always seemed to her that he tried to protest, saying that pity must not claim what love had lost. Whenever she strove to bring back that hour — she seemed to hear that. But she was never quite sure remembering only the hasty fetching of the nearest preacher, recalling dimly that some one made some attempt to prevent what was going forward, the startled coming in of the neighbors, their awed, excited whispering. Sometimes it seemed to her that the room had been full of hushed sobbing but she herself had not wept. The only thing that she ever could remember clearly was the sudden strength and clearness of William Rowan's voice making the responses in the marriage service. For better or for worse — so long as



## Phœbe's Plight

they both should live. The ineffable piteousness of it! Yet even as she listened there came a strange new feeling of peace to her own heart. She had done what she could to make up for what she could not help. And after this she had waited calmly, smiling at him whenever he opened his eyes long enough to smile at her. Then the night seemed to go on like a quiet dream. Only a faint wind sighed through the blooming locust. No one spoke — till they told her that he was dead.

Silently she had allowed them to lead her over to her own house. How still it was! All was peace now — perfect and everlasting peace for him — and a measure of peace for her as well. She still had no thought of weeping. There seemed nothing more to weep for. But after a long time the late full moon came up and with its coming a mocking-bird began to sing. Only a few faintest ripples of melody. Yet the unearthly sweetness of that first soft rippling touched her numbed heart, and soon melted her distress into gentle tears. Then with the rising of the moon the melody rose too, swelling at last into a heavenly flood that swept her grief clear away — upward toward heaven.



## The Little Hills

And all the other birds had sung and the sun had shone while his soldier comrades with bared heads, were bearing him to his last resting-place. For he had been a soldier too, one of the first to answer that awful mute appeal from the Alamo. And so those who had fought with him now bore him up the sunny hillside across the rosy meadows and above the fresh tenderly green fields stretching to the misty wooded hills. On every side was beauty and peace as the little procession wound its way up the hill while all the bells were tolling—not only the church bell but the courthouse bell and the schoolhouse bell—and even the humble bell that swung before the tavern—all had been rung in slow, solemn rotation to do him honor. The sunlight had been so warm and bright that the open bosom of Mother Earth had not seemed quite so cold—and Phœbe had looked away toward the wild flowers blooming near. There was just room to lay him beside her father and mother and she had felt that he would not be so lonely there, with the shining branches of the silver-beech coming down to the tender grass. But the sweetest and most peaceful of all was that when the kind neigh-



## Phœbe's Plight

bors had taken up the simple old hymn, the birds overhead had helped them sing.

Oh, no. Phœbe was not at all sad now, sitting there alone in the fragrant darkness. She was merely a little perplexed still, just a bit at a loss yet how to carry out her plans for happiness.



## IV

### THE NEW MINISTER

A FAINT whispering drew her wistful gaze upward. It was like a spirit chorus. The swallows — shadow-birds of the twilight — were circling the parsonage chimney at last. Their slanting wings now wavered in a long dark line, undulating like an endless scarf against the darkening sky. It was waving about her own chimney too, but she could not see it there directly overhead. A little later she would hear the soft fluttering of unseen wings that never failed to come softly floating down from their resting-place to hers. And she always listened for the pleasant sound without knowing that her utter loneliness craved even this mere murmur of life.

Alone again in her seat under the vines, she watched the circling swallows so intently that she forgot all the grave thinking there still was



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to do, and did not see John Wood, the new minister, till he stood at her feet. Then she sprang up startled and frightened. Her first thought was that he had come like the others to tell her what a great mistake she was making. As a minister it was his right, perhaps his duty. She never questioned any one's right to advise or warn her, never doubted the motive of a word thus spoken. But she was very tired just now and always very shy. Then she hardly knew him at all. He and his aunt were almost strangers, and they had come at a time when she could pay slight attention to anything except her own sorrow. Since then the church had been undergoing repairs, so that there had been no opportunity to hear him preach.

But she managed to meet him now with a smile and hold out her hand. They had seen each other often across the big road and had met more than once for a moment and in the presence of others. But they had never been so close together as they were now standing thus face to face and alone, she looking down through the fragrant opening in the flowering vines and he looking up from the sunken doorstep. For there was still light a-plenty, the



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witching light that glimmers over the shadowed earth with the closing of heaven's west windows. So that they could see distinctly enough and to both of them it seemed as if they were meeting and seeing one another for the first time. It was a complete and pleasing surprise to her that he was so good-looking and so tall with such fair hair and such fine gray eyes. To him it came as a revelation that a little brown woman could be so beautiful without a single perfect feature. Her face was the sweetest, the most wistfully lovely that he had ever looked into. Yet he could hardly tell what made it so. Perhaps the long lashes that cast those exquisite shadows around the brown eyes, gave it this tender charm. He thought they did.

He sat down on the edge of the porch when she invited him to take a seat, saying that he liked to watch the swallows circling, as he had seen her watching them as he crossed the big road. And he saw the quick glance that she gave him and idly wondered why it is, that the most innocent and honest of us always feel that uneasy pang, on learning that we have been observed unawares. Smiling at the



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thought he went on talking of the swallows, only waiting now and then for her to speak a bashful word or two. But there were momentary silences while they watched the beautiful, mystical spectacle with uplifted faces from which the smiles had faded. For there is something solemn in all real beauty and mystery.

“How beautiful and mysterious they are,” he said. “Little shadow-ships of the air — with two slender wings for sails and two slenderer feathers for rudders — launched upon the golden ocean of sunset and sailing into the silver sea of shadows.” He turned with a smile. “That faint twittering might come from bird-spirits abroad.”

“Indeed the swallows are very much alive,” she answered in the same tone, speaking much less diffidently than usual because it was such a relief to talk about anything except the one thing that she feared to hear mentioned. And then she knew more about birds than most things, having lived with them rather than people all her life. “And the bravest little bodies — far braver than many big birds. There! See that. Look — look!”

For the cry of an owl had rung from the



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great elm and — sure enough — as if to prove what she said, the long dark line did drop and straighten in arrowlike pursuit of the hawking enemy. Then — safe once more — it drooped again and peacefully began to weave narrowing circles around the chimney as before.

“My aunt doesn’t like the swallows,” he said lightly. “She declares that they are a bother and always sending grass and feathers down the chimney. She doesn’t like anything that makes housekeeping harder. In fact she doesn’t like to keep house. She only does it for me because I haven’t a wife and because she thinks no minister who boards can ever be properly respected. Maybe she’s right — probably she is. At all events I appreciate the great, daily effort she makes. Her taste is for natural history. I’m sure that she has a grudge against the swallows only because she can’t get at them. I caught her examining a bit of one of their eggs — a pearly fragment flecked with red — under her microscope the other day. You see our old home is in a large town so that this is her first good chance to study Nature — and she’s finding wonders,” he said, laughing. “Every night since we’ve



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been here she has heard a queer, shivering cry, a sort of feathered moan from over this way — ”

“ Oh — yes — that’s the screech-owl,” said Phœbe eagerly, quite forgetting her diffidence. “ She can see it too if she likes almost any night — by keeping quiet and having patience. It’s a comical little bunch of speckled feathers — all head and eyes. But sometimes — ”

A sudden recollection sobered her and she shivered, recalling a dreadful midnight not long before when she had been awakened by a wild beating of invisible wings in utter darkness.

“ At first I was so terrified that I didn’t know what it was, or what in the world to do,” she said shivering again: “ It was so dark that I couldn’t see a thing. I didn’t dare get out of bed and was too scared to remember the candle and matches on the chair beside me. When I did think of them I was afraid to put out my hand. So there I lay — quaking — with those awful wings almost touching my head as they dashed by. At last though I got the candle lit somehow and saw



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a screech-owl sitting on the top of the window, turning its big horned head clear round as if it would twist it off—and glaring at me with its awful eyes. Mercy! It makes me shudder to think of it. And I didn't know any more what to do then than before and was worse frightened too—if that could be. But presently he began to swell out and to snap his bill as if getting ready to bite. I couldn't stand that and got up and stood still by the bed—trying hard to think what to do. There wasn't anybody to call—nobody to help me—not a living soul in the house but myself. I didn't dare take my eyes off him to look round but presently I thought of the long-handled broom standing in the corner. It took me some time to edge over to it without turning my back on the owl—and he never blinked once. But it took still longer to catch him under the broom. For every time I tried he dashed round the room like a fierce goblin, hissing and snapping his bill and swelling out, bigger and bigger. But I did get him after a while and raked him down the wall, slowly and carefully, trying not to hurt him. Hurt *him*? Mercy! It put me up to all I knew



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to keep him from hurting *me*. Gracious! how he fought. I could hardly hold him down now that I had him—and so was worse off than ever for I couldn't let go—couldn't even rake him over nearer the window hoping he'd fly out as he had flown in. It looked like I'd have to stand there holding the broom with both hands, till somebody came in the morning. But my sleeve brushed my work-basket and that gave me an idea. If I could turn the basket over him and weight it down, that would keep him safe and give him plenty of air. For I had taken out the silk lining that very day and hadn't put in the fresh one. Well—that's what I did—though I don't know how to this very minute and weighted the basket down with my heaviest book. Oh! oh—How weak I was!”

The new minister was looking at her though the dusk was so deep now that he could not see the rueful little face very clearly. But he saw with wonderful clearness the quaint, pathetic, pretty, lonely little figure of helplessness that her simple words brought before him. And seeing it he wondered why this guileless story which was evidently meant



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to amuse him should have moved him instead.

“Well, that wasn’t all—not nearly all,” sighed Phœbe so intent that she did not notice the look or the silence. “Naturally worn out I went back to bed because I couldn’t stand up and actually fell asleep still so frightened that my heart was beating by leaps. I don’t know how long it was before I was awakened by the very same thing—only the wings sounded larger and wilder and to beat the blackness more fiercely. I nearly lost my wits. Surely he would eat me up this time. Putting him under the basket had made him still more angry and dangerous. I didn’t stop to wonder how he had got out. I just drew the cover over my head and kept it there—cuddling down and shuddering—till I nearly smothered. With the fright and fatigue I could hardly breathe anyway, and had to take the cover off my face before long, and lie there almost fainting with those awful wings rushing by. At last I couldn’t stand it another moment. It seemed better to get up and let him bite me and have the worst over. And so I got up and lit the candle and started in reck-



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less desperation to get the broom again as it was the only weapon I had. But in crossing the room I turned over my work-basket—and *out flew the other owl*—for this wasn't the same one as I thought. There were two of the frightful goblins now, both dashing madly about, hissing and snapping their bills and swelling themselves out."

"And *then* what did you do?" he asked smiling but with a tightening in his throat.

"Ran out here—over there in the furthest corner of the porch where the vines are thickest. It wasn't quite dawn," she added hastily, "and there's hardly any passing at that hour. But a rooster crowed somewhere in the neighborhood before long and that is always a cheerful sound. It makes you feel safe. Then somebody began chopping wood—way off—and I always like to hear that too. It makes you think of families—large happy families—with plenty of company—gathering around the fire even in summer time. After that I wasn't afraid. But I didn't go in till broad daylight, long after the owls were gone—for these vines were nearly as thick then as they are now."

She broke off suddenly in some confusion



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and sat still and ill at ease. Already it seemed to her unaccountable and rather unseemly, that she should have spoken so freely of these intimate matters to a comparative stranger. She felt ashamed and wondered how she could have done it. For she did not know that the shyest soul may be so lonely that it rushes to meet the first congenial spirit.

He saw her sudden embarrassment without knowing what caused it, and this unexpected withdrawal made him uneasy too. He was not yet quite familiar with his duties as a minister. It now flashed over him that he should say something about her husband, that he ought to make some reference to her recent bereavement. For he knew of it and of the sad circumstances of her marriage, having heard all that the mere lookers-on could tell. But there was something in the drooping aloofness of this little black-clad figure, though he could see it only dimly, that held him silent. Intuition led him safely away and he began to speak quietly of the real anxiety that he felt for his aunt. And he could have hit upon nothing more sure to arouse Phœbe than any appeal for sympathy and help.



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“It really was a great sacrifice for her to leave her old home and lifelong friends — who understand her harmless ways — and come here to live among strangers in a strange place. And she did it solely for my sake.” His earnest tone grew lighter and he laughed merrily. “Yes, she thinks that a minister cannot be properly respected unless he has a home of his own. Maybe — she’s right — I don’t know. But it’s certainly most unselfish of her to keep house for me — when she hates housekeeping with all her heart. I’ve always felt that we all deserve special credit for doing the things that we most dislike. And it must be especially hard to do them when we are no longer young. The very move was hard enough. Moving old people is like transplanting old trees,” he said rather sadly.

“Maybe so — I’m afraid so — very much afraid,” she said hurriedly almost as if in alarm. “That’s the very thing I’ve been thinking about — long and hard — this whole day through.”

“Yes?” he said eagerly, but had to go on without another word from her. “One reason for my coming over this evening so unceremoniously was to beg you to be neighborly with my aunt.



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You would if you knew how homesick she has been. I don't dare ask the older ladies of the church. There has been a grave breach already. That yeast-jar on the front gate-post —" he said, laughing again.

Phœbe laughed too but cordially promised to do her best.

"Then come over often to see her," he urged honestly believing that he spoke solely on his aunt's behalf. "Come early to-morrow morning and just as often and as soon as you can. Please do. We are going to the woods — I'm that anxious to please her. She is a botanist and a student of natural history — an ardent lover of bugs and weeds and other unattractive things that don't interest me in the least. But turn about is fair play and she does her best to keep house. She's still looking for wonders in this unknown country. Perhaps you would come too. Do come and go with us early to-morrow morning — before the sun gets too warm."

"Not to-morrow," with a quick change of tone as recollection chilled her and with the same sudden shrinking. "I couldn't — I'm expecting company."



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He waited, much perplexed. But she said nothing more and the constraint soon grew so great that he could only rise to go. This he did saying rather formally that he—and his aunt—would be pleased to have her come whenever she found it entirely convenient. Nevertheless he looked back more than once on the way across the big road, trying to see through the falling dusk. At the gate he stood so long, still gazing and wondering, that she also began to wonder thinking it strange that the light of his lamp did not shine out, throwing a broad, shining band almost to her feet. Other lights were already glimmering farther off under the great trees where darkness was gathering. For it was in the dark of the moon and the neighbors never lingered long away from their own thresholds unless there was bright moonlight. And the dimly lit windows never glimmered long through the thick vines and low boughs. Most of the people were ready to go to bed with the birds.



## V

### THE NEIGHBORS AND THE NEWCOMERS

By sunrise the next morning everybody knew that even Mrs. Pottle had failed to turn Phœbe; that her new relations were actually coming in spite of the general protest; that they were in fact already on the way and would get there that very day unless the stage broke down.

There was usually more or less uncertainty about the time of its arrival but delay only made expectation keener—if that could be. For the stage's coming and going were always most keenly interesting events. It was the sole link between this remote corner of the earth and the outside world and it made only two trips a week with the mail. No one in the community wrote or received many letters, to be sure, but of course there was always a chance that some one—especially Arabella—



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might get a letter and then there was also the prospect of an occasional passenger. Few travellers ever set out for the village yet nevertheless a good many rather singular wayfarers reached it, for the reason that Hillery Kibbey, the stage-driver, never passed any one a-foot on the road without offering a free ride. To have done that would have been against the kind custom of the country and Hillery himself was a friendly soul, fond of company and glad to have any one to talk to on his long route. Indeed his remarkable conversational powers were among the several causes of his great and long popularity. But there was another and a more exclusive reason for his being particularly well known and liked by the leading ladies of the village.

This was a habit that they all had of getting him to fetch, from the larger shops in the large town at the other end of his route, certain choice articles of dress which were not to be found nearer by. No one knew how the habit had first been formed but it had long been firmly established thus making Hillery a person of recognized social importance. He not only brought every dress-bonnet of any real



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elegance that came to the village for years and years, but he took it back again when it was not quite right—as it hardly ever was—and with elaborate verbal directions for its alteration into the bargain. It was really wonderful that he could remember so much that he did not understand. But the dullest of us can learn a good deal when it is as much to our interest as this was to his. Moreover Hillery was by no means dull and naturally obliging.

Under the circumstances it was both necessary and pleasant that the very first ladies in all the country round, should have long and confidential confabs with Hillery every time he came and nearly every time he went. For if it chanced that one of them wanted nothing done for herself, she was naturally none the less interested in knowing what he was doing for the other ladies. And Hillery soon managed to make it quite clear that the surest way to prevent his forgetting the smallest detail of an order, and the only way to secure his undivided attention, was to invite him to dinner or supper. The men for their part were quite willing to have him invited, because they all



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liked him and then he always brought the latest news. However it was to the squire's house that he was bidden more often than anywhere else and there that he fared best. In the early spring or fall at the critical seasons when the beaver or the leghorn dress-bonnets of the squire's lady were at stake, Hillery was sometimes invited to spend the night in the best spare-room, and the stage horses also feasted in the squire's roomy stables. And so with the passing of the placid years a rather keen rivalry had sprung up among the ladies of the neighborhood over the good offices of the stage-driver. In the prosperous days that this story tells of he seldom had to go to the tavern. House after house became as home to him till there were only two that he did not visit and both of them — oddly enough — belonged to his best customers. One was the home of Mrs. Arabella, or rather Mrs. Captain Lightfoot as she preferred to be called. She had a right to the title, inasmuch as she said that her husband had written back that he had acted as captain of the company of gold-hunters with whom he had gone to California. Certainly her claim



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was never disputed and could not have been had anybody ever wished to dispute it for nobody knew anything except what she gave out—in her vaguely important way—from his letters and those were longer and longer in coming. It was two years now since the last one had come yet that wonderful golden glamour—that glittering mist—which wrapped the Argonauts remained as dazzling as ever. It gilded even those whom they had left behind and Arabella still shone brilliantly by this reflected light. It was indeed a source of pride to the entire community to have a real Argonaut's lady in the neighborhood. In fact there was no little surprise that so distinguished a personage should be content in so remote a spot. But whenever anything of the kind was said to Arabella herself she always gave a charming explanation which satisfied everybody.

“It is solely on Mandy Pottle's account,” she used to say with a confidential lowering of her pleasant voice. “We were schoolmates, you know. I have relied on her for guidance all my life. She has such a strong character and such sound judgment—and I'm as helpless as



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a baby. Oh no, I couldn't think of going away from her now when I haven't the captain to lean on. No, indeed — I couldn't possibly live away from dear Mandy Pottle."

Nobody ever thought of doubting her sincerity. Even old Mrs. Crabtree agreed that it was quite true that Arabella could not live anywhere else — without a penny in the world to live on — while she certainly could live here on the fat of the land, just as long as she would let Mandy Pottle tell her when to breathe. But then that old game-maker was always saying something sharp about somebody. Arabella was really held in the highest respect. Whenever the stage came in the few men who were waiting for business letters always stood back — hats in hand — to allow Arabella to pass into the post-office first. And the shoemaker who was also the postmaster never dreamt of serving anybody else till he had gone over the whole mail to see if there was a letter for her from the captain. Then everybody always looked sorry — and surprised too — that there was not one. That is everybody did except Arabella herself. She was always perfectly certain that it would come



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in the very next mail and fluttered out of the post-office just as gayly as she fluttered in, bowing and smiling with her pink ribbons flying and tripped off on her high heels. Those high heels by the way, gave Hillery Kibbey a great deal of trouble because they were not much worn and hard to find. Sometimes he had to have them made and advance the money out of his own pocket. But he had no need to grumble knowing from experience that Mrs. Pottle would pay him — with a handsome profit — when Arabella could not, which was almost invariably the case. Then Hillery admired Arabella considering her the finest lady of his acquaintance, as indeed she was. Also she had such a taking way of asking him to drop in any time for a light, tasty snack that he hardly noticed her failure to name any special time. Moreover he did notice that she seldom forgot to get Mrs. Pottle to invite him and often hinted till the squire, out of all patience, shouted clear across the big road telling him to fetch the stage horses too.

The other house which never entertained him was old Mrs. Crabtree's. He had no special liking for that lady whom he usually



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spoke of as "a caution." Nevertheless she was a good customer sending by him for books nearly every trip and paying liberally without looking too closely into profits either. But business can never be everything to the most enterprising man of proper self-respect. It nettled Hillery to see old Mrs. Crabtree sitting at her window without taking the trouble to nod or even turn her head when he drove up with the books. He was not used to being treated as a mere carrier and the fact that the scornful old lady sent her daughter out with other orders and the cash in hand, did not sooth his wounded pride in the least. For Anna Crabtree — poor soul — was one of those persons who are never taken into account. And finally Hillery set his wits to work. It was not easy for him to find a way to reach "the grand Mogul" as he sometimes called the old lady. She cared for nothing but books and Hillery read only an occasional newspaper, having a very poor opinion of anybody who did read much, especially books. Yet he was not one to allow his own preference or personal prejudice to stand in the way when he once set out to do a thing. Accord-



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ingly it was not a great while before he stopped—drawing up the stage before Mrs. Crabtree's window—with a respectful and self-respecting good-morning which was followed by a fresh piece of literary news. He had got it from the clerk of the book-store in exchange for a big twist of the finest old tobacco. But old Mrs. Crabtree had no means of knowing that and stared at him blankly for a moment. Then she understood well enough to laugh and forthwith began a long and lively confab. Henceforth this was repeated nearly as often as he passed, for he continued the study of literature along with his pursuit of the fashions. His success in this line was even more remarkable than his mastery of millinery, if not quite so generally appreciated. It is true that it never brought him and old Mrs. Crabtree any nearer together than the gate and the window but Hillery was quite content. He had properly asserted himself and from this time on had only the best of feeling in the matter. However on this memorable morning in June he could not stop even for the usual confab. And the old lady seeing the stage go by and catching a glimpse of its passengers,



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suddenly bethought herself that it might perhaps be amusing to hear something about the arrival.

“Put on your bonnet Anne, and run up to Phœbe’s. The old folks are in the stage sure enough. It couldn’t be anybody else. Don’t stop to get your dress-bonnet — your sunbonnet will do. There it is. Only make haste — I want to hear all about it. Hurry! One looks about as well on you as the other,” eyeing her as she usually did — with the critical intolerance of an old woman who has been a beauty for a plain woman who is no longer young; an intolerance that seems curiously unaffected by the closest ties of blood. “Run along as you are. What’s the odds! Then I want to know just what they all do and say when the stage gets there—it’s too warm and too much trouble for me to go myself. Now mind that you keep your eyes open. For goodness’ sake don’t go—as usual — with your head in a bag.”

Anne had been more than willing to make her escape in all haste. She was already on her way up the big road and began to breathe more freely beyond the reach of her mother’s voice. Glancing timidly from side to side she



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wondered that no one else was in sight. The housewives always came out with their sewing to save time, and sat on the front porches in full view while waiting to see the stage pass. There never was the slightest attempt to hide the interest that they all felt, nor any reason for trying to conceal it. But on this memorable morning in June most of them deemed it more delicately respectful on Phœbe's account, that they should for once watch and wait indoors, with discreet openings between the ruffles of the white curtains. Only Mrs. Pottle and the widow Wall had been seen and they had gone together up the big road but ten minutes before, the squire's wife having called by for her friend. As they now walked along under the trees Mrs. Pottle remarked that things sometimes came about so that a sense of duty would not allow you to consider solely what was due to yourself. She then explained why she was out now when she would have much preferred staying at home, and attending to her own affairs since she got such scant thanks for attending to other people's. It was quite time — so she said — that some decisive step was taken to put a stop to the scandal of that yeast-jar.



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"Now just think of it, Jane," she appealed almost pathetically. "On the front gate-post of a nice parsonage that a respectable congregation has bought and paid for. It fairly makes my blood boil to remember the strawberries that I've capped—yes, and picked too bending down stout as I am and in the broiling sun—to say nothing about the cream that I've whipped, to help make the money that went into that parsonage. Besides there are all the tussles I had with the squire to make him do *his* part."

"'Pears to me he should have wanted to do it without any making," said the widow Wall tactlessly: "he's a member too."

"Of course he did." Mrs. Pottle fired instantly. "That was only his way of getting me all worked up as he glories in doing—and you know it, Jane—just as well as I do. There *are* men though—anyway there *used* to be—"

The widow Wall hastily opened and shut the parsonage gate with such a clatter that the rest of the taunt was lost—if it was intended for one: "Land alive, look at that!" she cried pointing to a row of large pale blue flowers. "Common Jimson weeds—if my eyes see



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straight — spread out on the front porch as if they were something rare. Well — I never!”

“And seed pods too — sure as we are standing here — hung up in the wind to sow the whole neighborhood,” scolded Mrs. Pottle. “When I’ve pulled the weeds out of the parsonage garden with my own hands and stood over the black boys for hours at a time. The next thing we know she’ll be planting these torments that we had so much trouble to get rid of. Yes, it’s certainly time that something was done before the parsonage goes teetotally to rack and ruin.”

“The flowers really are pretty,” said the widow Wall with her quick eyes for the ornamental, looking closer at the blossoms of the Jamestown weed. “They are like fine artificials and I wouldn’t mind having some of the same kind on my dress-bonnet. My taste always was dressier than yours, Mandy. But maybe that was because you are stouter and —”

“There now!” exulted Mrs. Pottle turning round after knocking hard. “What did I tell you! The front door’s shut and the side door standing wide open — with the chickens walk-



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ing through the passage and not a soul to be seen or heard about the place. Well — I told you all how it would be when you would have another single preacher.”

“Maybe he will find a wife among us,” said the widow Wall with a conscious smile. “He’s real handsome and very intelligent and not at all too young either,” as she spoke, perking in the quaintest manner imaginable.

“Marry!” scouted Mrs. Pottle. “Ridiculous! Who under the shining sun could he find *here* to marry?”

The widow Wall bridled, but fortunately her friend was knocking loudly on the front door and did not notice.

“Ah-ha! just as I expected,” Mrs. Pottle fumed. “Nobody at home. Ten to one but that half-cracked old woman is off to the woods again, taking the new minister with her. Well, we’ll sit down here on the front porch anyhow long enough to rest. For it’s as much mine and yours as anybody’s. That’s just what makes me say what I do about that yeast-jar on the front gate-post. She has no more right to set it there than to bring it down and put it on ours.”



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“Well — some people seem to think sometimes that they have some right to do as they like,” said the widow Wall showing the resentment that she dared not express more directly.

But this also was lost on Mrs. Pottle who was leaning forward to watch the big road with keen attention. For the stage was now rumbling toward Phœbe’s gate, and to see it arrive had been the real object of this visit to the parsonage. Mrs. Pottle had not known that there was no one at home, but she had made up her mind to insist upon sitting on the front porch. From that point she could have a clear, close view of Phœbe’s front gate which she knew no other way to get. Offended dignity would not let her go to the house and she was too curious about the newcomers to miss seeing their arrival.

“There they come,” cried the widow Wall: “and there’s Phœbe now standing out at the gate — waiting for them — poor thing.”

“She’s brought it on herself. There wasn’t any need for her to saddle herself with such a burden.” Mrs. Pottle’s heart hardened suddenly, seeing all this going on without having any part in it.



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"Hillery is driving straight on without stopping to leave the mail-bag. Just look how grand he sits up — and the wide swath he cuts, — in turning to pull up before Phœbe's gate. My goodness! Did you see that? Why, the old lady hopped out without waiting for Phœbe or anybody to open the stage-door. She just flung it back herself. And she ain't old at all. Her hair's black as a crow," said the widow, enviously. "But then maybe her face is wrinkled," hopefully, "you can't tell this far."

"All the worse then — there is always something wrong when the hair stays black after the face gets wrinkled," declared Mrs. Pottle with conviction.

Her own comely, rosy face bore few lines and there were plenty of silver threads in her abundant dark hair. The widow Wall glanced at her in open admiration and with secret envy. The look could not but please Mrs. Pottle. Then both the ladies turned again to look at what was going forward around Phœbe's front gate.

"See her small head. Isn't it the smallest you ever saw on such a tall woman?" said the widow Wall. "She's lanky too. Now I'm tall myself — but nobody ever could accuse me of



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being slab-sided. Just see how she towers head and shoulders above Phœbe and Anne and her head is smaller than theirs. Both of them and the old lady all seem to be having lots of trouble to get the old man out of the stage. Phœbe is such a mite and Anne's no help to anybody. Don't you think we ought to go over —"

"No, I don't," said Mrs. Pottle shortly and tartly. "And I do think you might have more consideration for me than to mention such a thing, after seeing the way Phœbe treated me last night. What's more — you were partly to blame for it."

The retort came with unexpected spirit: "I didn't say one thing that I didn't mean. And I don't believe Phœbe did either — so there! I'm mighty certain anyhow that she believes it's right to bring these old folks here. And I wouldn't like even to say she wasn't — much less try to keep her from doing what she thinks she ought to do. There ain't many people, Mandy, that are always as sure they're right and everybody else is wrong — as *you* are."

"Well Jane, if you've come here only to quarrel it seems better to be going home. It



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was *my* impression that we were coming as christians for the good of our church," rising haughtily. "But of course you can do as you've a mind to. I decline to stay a moment longer," moving toward the steps. "Then I want to send a basket of June apples over to Arabella."

The widow Wall followed rather frightened at her own revolt, as she always was at these uncontrollable flashes of spirit. Then she was chronically jealous of her friend's kindness to Arabella as Mrs. Pottle knew. Feeling very uncomfortable indeed she walked on in silence at a loss for something to say. They kept to the other side of the big road, but could see plainly enough all that was going on around the stage.

"The old gentleman's leg must be bad yet," the widow Wall mustered courage to say. "Old bones are hard to mend—sometimes they don't knit at all. Just look, Mandy, they are almost carrying him in the house. My! There's plenty of trouble ahead for Phœbe—poor little thing."

But Mrs. Pottle was not to be so easily placated and said severely that it was silly to waste sympathy where it was neither deserved nor wanted.



## VI

### TRANSPLANTING OLD TREES

It was quite true that Phœbe needed no pity just then. She had never been happier in her whole life than she was now while helping Father Rowan into the house. He was not yet able to walk alone even with the aid of his cane. Then he was a short, stout, clumsily built old man and could hardly have been anything but awkward even in his best days. Yet she liked him from the first glance that passed between them before he got out of the stage. For she had looked into it with shrinking haste, hurriedly seeking the likeness which she dreaded to find. There was not a trace of it in his broad, red, good-natured face. She felt guilty because she could not help feeling glad.

That was why she suddenly bent her shoulder to its task, so willingly and strongly, that Mother Rowan on the other side had



## Transplanting Old Trees

hardly any weight to bear. Anne carried his cane and between them they finally managed to get him up the steps and through the passage and into the chamber.

“There now!” Phœbe beamed in saying this. “You are sitting in your own arm-chair. This room is yours too — yours and Mother Rowan’s. And I do hope you both may like it. Only let me know if there’s anything you would wish changed. Perhaps you might prefer to have the bed somewhere else. I put your chair here close to the front window so that you might look out on the big road. There’s a good deal of passing sometimes. Maybe you will like to see it — till you’re well again and can go everywhere. When you are tired we can move you over by the back window where you may look at the garden and smell the spice pinks. But you’ll soon be going about.”

Then crossing her little hands she stood by his side looking around the chamber with a glow of open pride. It had taken a great deal of hard work to make it look so well and she had done it all herself. Her sulky servant had bluntly refused to turn a hand, being as much opposed to this addition to the family as the



## The Little Hills

rest of her friends and with more personal cause. But Phœbe was not thinking of these matters now as she looked around the shadowed chamber smiling happily to see how very nice and quiet and cool it was. The walls were freshly whitewashed and the spotless floor was nearly as white as the walls and brightened by gay home-made rugs. Her finest, whitest fringed counterpane and her nicest pillow-cases with the widest ruffles made the high old bed look like a newly fallen snow-drift. The white muslin curtains were ruffled too and drawn back, to let in the cool green light that came through the vines, and the soft breeze with its scent of roses. But the prettiest of all was the wide fireplace filled with the misty green of asparagus boughs. It seemed to her that nothing could be more exquisite. She had allowed most of the tender white stalks that peeped up in her asparagus bed to turn into this mist of verdure when she would have liked to eat them. And now proud of her success she turned shyly and glanced at Mother Rowan to see if she had yet seen how very, very beautiful it was — floating out of the deep fireplace covering the whitened bricks with emerald clouds.



## Transplanting Old Trees

That alert lady of quick motions had already taken off her queer black bonnet and had laid it down, an ink spot on the whiteness of the counterpane. Her singularly small head with its abnormally dark hair was thus fully revealed. She was folding her mourning veil and now spread it over the bonnet. It was remarkable that so slight a thing could be done with such decision and energy. Then she turned sharply and her snapping black eyes swept the room in a single glance of startling keenness which stopped abruptly at the fireplace.

"All that green stuff has got to come out — first thing," she said shortly. "It's unhealthy and cluttering to boot. Then *he* — him over yonder a-sitting by the window — thinks he's bound to have a fire night and morning all the year round," she said, with a toss of her head toward her husband but without a glance. "There's no sense in it and I'd just about broken him of thinking he had to have one when he hurt his leg. Since then he lets on that he's chilly and I can't tell whether he is or not."

"Yes indeed, of course he is. Thank you for telling me," said Phoebe cheerfully, ashamed of feeling so much disappointed over such a



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trifle. "Certainly I'll take the boughs out right away. I want you both to have everything just as you like and are used to. But I won't know unless you tell me, so please do."

She knelt down before the hearth and began to remove the delicate, feathery sprays. But she could hardly stifle a sigh to think that this exquisite greenness — left a little longer in the garden — would have been gemmed with ruby seeds. Then an anxious pang sent these fancies flying. A fire all the year round! She stood up suddenly and cast an uneasy glance through the back window. No, the woodpile was not in sight. It had sunk below the row of pink and white hollyhocks. She had never given a thought to fuel in making her plans for a larger family. Very little had been needed for the cooking of her own food and there has been no other need for it heretofore in the summer time. Kneeling down again before the fireplace she wondered how she might manage to get some wood. But she looked up brightly smiling, though a little startled by the tone in which her name was called.

"Yes, it's always been his way to slide along



## Transplanting Old Trees

on the soft side," said Mother Rowan snapping her eyes: "but it's never been mine. I believe in doing what's right no matter how hard it is for me or anybody else. Right's right and wrong's wrong — just the same — no matter who likes it and who don't. When a thing's got to be done, the sooner it is the better according to *my* notion. There's no shilly-shally about me nor any deceitfulness either. And that's the reason I've made up my mind to tell you the downright truth at the very start."

Phœbe was rather frightened by this time and her transparent, uplifted face showed it yet she was still bravely smiling.

"For it would be downright deceitful to let you start out a-thinking that I wanted to come here — amongst strangers and begin all over again at my age and with him in that fix — for I didn't — and don't — want any such thing. 'Twould be against nature if I did with a daughter of my own to live with. Now then — we both know just where we stand for that's the truth with the bark on it."

Phœbe hastily stood up with her arms full of the green mist. Her face flushed and her



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lips began to quiver while her eyes filled with tears.

“Tut-tut! What’s the use of all that?” growled Father Rowan. “Sounds to me mighty ungrateful. For my part I haven’t heard anything about our living with Kate. If she asked us *I* don’t know it,” he said with a glance of defiance at his wife.

There was a defiant note in his deep, hoarse voice also. It made Phœbe think of an amiable bear growling through the bars of his cage, just to say what he could do if he were free and had a mind to. Then there was a humorous twinkle in his kind eyes as he looked round at her. She drew nearer to him already feeling that they must stand by one another if they were to stand at all. But neither ventured to speak seeing how those black eyes snapped from one to the other.

“Well, it wasn’t *my* fault that we didn’t get here while we had a home of our own to come to,” declared Mother Rowan squaring herself. “We weren’t kept away till too late, because *I* went off and got *my* leg broken while I was out on a—”

It was lucky that Hillery Kibbey appeared



## Transplanting Old Trees

just then in the open door with the little trunk, and set it down on the bare floor with a noise that drowned everything else. Phœbe followed him into the passage and paid the cost of the journey out of her scanty store. Then she hurried back to help unpack so that the travellers might get settled as soon as possible.

“Till you are I can’t feel sure of keeping you for good—not till the last thing is taken out of the trunk and put away,” she said smiling timidly, with her sweet young face close to the grim old one. “Let me—”

“No, thank you,” Mother Rowan replied without any answering smile. “It’s better for me to handle my own things—and his too—so that I can know where to lay my hand on whatever I want—or he does—any hour of the day and night. Then—not to be deceitful—I’m bound to say that I never did like having my clothes—or his—pulled and hauled by anybody else.”

The blood flashed over Phœbe’s sensitive face coloring it more vividly than before. Yet a pretty flutter of dimples came with the rush of lovely color. For there was something comical in the wife’s never speaking the hus-



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band's name and in her always speaking at him, not once to him. It was already plain enough that this was a habit and not an accident. And so Phœbe's half-amused, half-frightened gaze now followed Mother Rowan who was going back and forth between the trunk and the wardrobe.

"It won't be easy getting along without the big deep closet I've been used to," she said. "But I reckon I can somehow. I certainly ought to know by this time how to make the best of things no matter how bad they may be. And I always *have* made the best of 'em!" she cried pausing with an armful of rusty garments, and queer odds and ends. Her eyes snapped as if they surely must send out sparks. "*That* I have! I can say that much for *myself* — whatever other folks may say for *themselves*," she said, jerking her head toward her husband. "Nobody living — or dead either for that matter — ever can say that I haven't," she said in fiery challenge. "If poor William were alive and here this minute and could speak, he'd tell you the very same thing."

Phœbe shrunk closer to Father Rowan's side breathing quickly. The little hand on his



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shoulder suddenly began to tremble so that he hastily put up his big one to pat it and hold it steady. But she felt that he shrank too and noted that he had no more to say than herself. Both of them wanted to run away and hide from those snapping eyes.

"Yes, he would," Mother Rowan went on busy again in laying the things on the wardrobe shelves. "He'd tell you that I've never shirked — that I've always stood just as close to the mark as I could — come what would."

"He *did* tell me," said Phœbe faintly, hanging her head. "He told me over and over what a hard life of self-sacrifice yours had been and how kind —"

But her voice suddenly failed and her eyes slowly brimmed as she looked up. She no longer saw this gaunt, grotesque figure. A noble character and an intrepid soul rose before her in its place. She remembered now all that she had heard of this strange woman's goodness: all her tireless striving against overwhelming misfortune: all her dauntless courage under lifelong discouragement: all her forgetfulness of self when self-sacrifice was bitterly hard: all her queer tenderness: all her unfailing kind-



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ness to a weak and ailing child — not her own. Phœbe's tender heart was deeply stirred. She felt keenly ashamed that she could not bring herself to say what she felt, that she dared not put her arms around that unbending neck and draw it down, and kiss those thin and harshly straightened lips. For she could not do anything but stand silent and gaze in wistful helplessness, still shrinking and quivering.

"No, nobody ever can charge *me* with making a difference between his son and my daughter like the common run of stepmothers," Mother Rowan continued in utter absorption. "So far as I could manage it, they always fared alike. That was the way as long as poor William lived and it's the same way now that he's dead. I've done by him just as I would have done by her. I've got him a handsome tombstone."

"Oh," cried Phœbe recoiling before she could control herself under this shock.

"Why *not*?" challenged Mother Rowan on the defensive at once. Then the jealousy that was always smouldering blazed up. "Hadn't I a *right* to do for him just the same as before?"

"Yes — no — I only — it seems so soon —"



## Transplanting Old Trees

faltered Phœbe forced to say something, and not knowing what she did murmur.

“Maybe it does to *you*,” retorted Mother Rowan. “A perfect stranger couldn’t be expected to feel toward him as I do after bringing him up. And so far as *that* goes he would have to wait a whet for a tombstone if I had sat back — holding *my* hands — and waited till he got one from his own flesh and blood.”

“There — that’ll do,” growled Father Rowan.

It seemed to Phœbe that the broad, bent old shoulders shrunk a little more notwithstanding this sturdy protest. But her whole attention — frightened, bewildered, fascinated — was fixed on that small face. She did not know in the least what its singular expression meant. She was not learned enough in life’s lessons to read the tragic story which it told in a way that was piteously absurd. The look on that forbidding face was really one of pure exaltation. It was an expression of spiritual triumph which had come at last to a grimly unimaginative nature, after years of fierce striving toward a single ideal. For this honest woman of narrow mind and strenuous soul had only one — her duty to her stepson — her whole hard life through.



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But she had done her best to reach it, had never ceased trying to hitch her humble "wagon to a star," the sole fixed star that she ever could see, always shining high and far over a dark and stony waste. Poor Mother Rowan! Let none of us dare laugh. For who of us has striven so hard and so long to reach any of the many stars that we are permitted to see?

And this was the supreme achievement of her long struggle. No wonder then that it now absorbed her so that she did not hear or see anything else. She sat down, forgetting the unpacking, and absently took up a turkey-wing and began fanning herself in excited jerks.

"It's a real large, handsome tombstone too," she went on proudly, nodding her small head till the tiny gold hoops in her ears swung to and fro. "And I didn't have to pay full price for it either because I got it at an auction."

"An auction!" repeated Phœbe, vaguely, thinking that she had not heard aright.

"Yes — an auction," said Mother Rowan, tartly. "Tombstone dealers have to sell out sometimes just like other folks. But a tomb-



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stone auction don't often come off just in the nick o' time as this one did. Why, it was the very week after poor William died." Then something that she saw in Phœbe's face caused her to fire up again. "And he needed the stone just as much first as last—I suppose. There's never any dilly-dally about me. No, I went right over to look at the stones before they were put up for sale. I made up my mind that he should have the best there was if I could raise the money for it. And you never can tell what you're getting if you bid in a hurry without knowing what you're doing. Then I wasn't a-going to give William any second-hand stone that had been made for somebody else. My conscience was clear of imposing on him while he was alive and I certainly didn't intend to begin playing him any mean tricks at this late day," she said with almost amiable fluency. "So I went beforehand and picked out the nicest, biggest stone there was in the whole lot. Then I hurried home and got out all the money I had and counted it very carefully. Most of the Mexican dollars that poor William had brought me from Mexico were in the same little bag just as he



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had given them to me. He was free-hearted when he had anything. I hadn't spent a dollar either except for the linen to make those fine, cool shirts—the ones I sent to him after he got sick—”

“Yes — I remember,” murmured Phœbe hastily, hanging her head.

“And I had some more too, a few more dollars that I'd earned teaching school,” Mother Rowan said, turning suddenly and snapping her eyes at the silent form beside the window. “I hardly know how they had escaped *his* clutches when the rest of my school money was sunk — without leave or license from me — in that worthless, bad-smelling land. A farm! *Him* with a farm — when he knew just as much what to do with it as a cat would know what to do with two tails.”

“Now — I tell you again — that's enough — a-plenty!” roared Father Rowan whose subjection was only recent and not yet complete.

His wife did not look at him again and ignored what he said: “I counted it all up — what I had earned and the Mexican dollars that poor William had given me. It seemed as if there ought to be enough. But you



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never can tell about an auction. Some people are real mean about bidding against you and running things up. The best way is to go early enough to get a front seat where you can catch the eye of the auctioneer. I was a-standing on the top door-step when the door was opened on the morning of the auction and so got my pick of the seats. I happened to know the auctioneer too, and I do believe he knocked the tombstone down to me just as soon as he honestly could. Anyway I got the very one I'd set my heart on—the largest and handsomest there was in the whole lot. And there it is—all ready,” she said, turning toward Phœbe with the manner of one who expects to be congratulated.

“Where?” faintly asked Phœbe who could think of nothing else to say.

“Under shelter of course,” said Mother Rowan huffily. “Where else should it be? And it's a-going to stay there too, till I can get it set up. It shall never be said of *me* that I gave *my* stepson a rain-stained and weather-streaked tombstone. Furthermore the storage on it is paid for two months. There's nothing more to do except see about having it put up



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properly. And I hope you've done *your* part and put him in a high, roomy place," she added with sudden suspicion. "I'm not a-going to have that large, handsome tombstone dumped down just anywhere."

But Phœbe was on her way out of the room. She had sprung up and now almost ran toward the door, with a sudden uncontrollable feeling that she could not stay a moment longer without breaking down.



## VII

### THE NEIGHBORS AND THEIR WAYS

By this time the whole town knew that Phœbe's new relations had come. Even those ladies who lived round the turn of the big road — which kept them from seeing the stage drive up to her gate — had heard the exciting whisper that flew along under the great trees from one vine-covered front porch to another. And now every feminine eye naturally turned toward the squire's comfortable white house, expecting to see Mrs. Pottle promptly on her way to call upon the strangers. For that was always the next thing in order after the arrival of a visitor. Nobody doubted that she would pass very soon. But it was harder than usual to wait till she did, because everybody was full of curiosity and eager to call and see for herself. The coming of the stage had so absorbed public attention that few of the neigh-



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bors had noticed Mrs. Pottle's passing in the other direction on her way home from the parsonage, and the widow Wall was little observed at any time. Those who had seen the squire's wife took it for granted that she was going to put on her newest lute-string dress and her freshest leghorn bonnet, in order to make the call in proper state.

Accordingly they waited with such patience as they could muster, cautiously bending forward to peer often and anxiously through the vines. Then all of a sudden they sat up very straight in utter amazement, on seeing her come out wearing a fresh white wrapper instead of the dove-colored silk dress and without any bonnet at all. More mysterious still she came no farther than her own front porch, and sitting down with marked deliberation, spread her nicest quilt-pieces on her lap and began to sew—as though settled for the day—in full view of the whole big road. Most of the amazed ladies could see her quite as distinctly as they were ever able to see anything through such a mist of green. Those who were farther off knew she was sitting on her front porch by catching glimpses of the white wrapper, when-



## The Neighbors and Their Ways

ever the soft breeze shifted the thick leaves. And so — after a moment of motionless astonishment — they peeped at one another sideways through their own vines in uneasy wonder; and shook their heads as if dumbly asking what in the world such behavior could mean. For nobody had ever heard of anything like it in the whole social history of the place.

There had never before been any delay in calling upon a visitor, especially a lady. The people were much too friendly and the visitors far too few to allow their welcome to be either tardy or lacking in warmth. This unprecedented state of things was therefore quite unaccountable and no one knew what to make of it. Least of all did any one know what to say or do till Mrs. Pottle said or did something. For of course it was always she — never any one else — who called first and usually within an hour or so of the visitor's arrival. It seemed only right and fitting that she should lead in this since she led in everything else and so all the ladies thought. Then to be quite frank it must have been a brave and enterprising woman as well as a presumptuous one, who would have ventured to take any social step before the



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squire's lady had shown the way. Only old Mrs. Crabtree could possibly have been so bold, and she hardly ever cared enough for anything or anybody to take any kind of trouble. The other ladies never thought of doing such a thing, and would have been nearly as much shocked as alarmed at the bare idea. Moreover there was something besides curiosity in the anxiety with which they waited now. Most of them were sincerely distressed on Phœbe's account. For after all these newcomers were really her relations. Any delay in calling must wound her—and none among them could bear to think of that—for she was much beloved. Yet what was to be done with Mrs. Pottle sitting there, sewing and rocking, without giving a sign of her intention or wishes? Sometimes she neither rocked nor sewed and sat as motionless in her white wrapper as a marble statue of indignation.

To make matters worse this was the very season for visiting and being visited; the very time out of the whole year when there was least need or wish to stay at home and when the neighbors were used to seeing most of one another. These long golden summer days and



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these short silvery summer nights were not yet too warm to be perfect and the crystalline air was like balm. There was no more work to do in the gardens at the present yet the flowers that bordered the vegetables were still in fullest, sweetest bloom. The newly mown grass was almost as fragrant as the flowers and quite as green as in earliest spring with only a richer texture. There was no dust yet to dim the soft brown earth of the quiet big road, rambling along beneath the flowering trees and beside the blooming bushes. Thus with nothing to do just then except be happy and kind the neighbors had been used — as far back as they could remember — to stroll from one house to another stopping often to chat but rarely going inside, for the reason that everybody else was sitting on the rose-wreathed porches. Beyond the open doors lay the scented, growing gardens and through the open windows floated the fresh white curtains.

Even the house-cleaning was done. Yes, it was entirely over even at the squire's where it usually began earlier and lasted later than in any other household, so safely over indeed that the squire himself had come back. It was not



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generally known where he went at such critical times, but he always disappeared at the first sign of these domestic upheavals. He would have gone before they were fairly upon him, but he never could tell in advance just when they were coming, because their appearance was slightly uncertain, owing to the earliness of the spring and the lateness of the fall. However the precise date had no effect whatever upon the squire's views and feelings. He always spoke of the house-cleaning as "The Rippit," and never hesitated to say that every rippit that came was worse and longer than any one of the many rippits that had gone before. Also he often said that he could not for the life of him see why a house — which was always so clean you hardly could live in it — should be torn up all over and all at once for days at a time and twice every year of a man's miserable life. Sometimes when driven to the very verge of profanity — though a deacon in the church — he declared that it would not have been so bad if the blamed old house had not always looked exactly the same after the rippit as before.

His wife very properly never took the least



## The Neighbors and Their Ways

notice of a word of this kind. She was not the sort of woman to expect a man to be reasonable in matters above his comprehension. And then she never let any difference of opinion from any source, or any opposition however strong, prevent her doing her own duty as she saw it — promptly, with all her might and without the slightest regard for anybody's wishes and feelings. Consequently as the spring was early that year she had begun house-cleaning with such promptness and had pursued it with such energy and rigor that it was actually over at last, and the squire had come back, knowing from long experience that he need fear no relapse before the next fall. He did not mind the finishing touches of fresh whitewash which were still to be given the farthest fences and the oldest outbuildings. And even these were done now on this rare June morning, so leaving a greener greenness amid the sweet-smelling whiteness.

It was no wonder then that the ladies were as much perplexed as disturbed, to see Mrs. Pottle thus sitting at leisure on her own shady front porch with her choicest quilt-pieces lying on her lap; and that uneasiness grew as the



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creeping hours went by. The widow Wall was greatly concerned and rather more agitated than almost any one else. For while she knew what had occurred at Phœbe's on the previous evening — which the other ladies did not know — she had not for a moment believed that Mrs. Pottle's resentment would go the length of withholding the usual call upon the visitors. She could hardly believe it still. Yet what else could Mandy Pottle mean by such unheard-of behavior. The widow Wall could not help going out to her own gate beyond the low boughs and leaning shrubs, to get a better view. It seemed as if her own eyes must deceive her. When she had made sure that they did not, she felt that she ought to go straight on down to the squire's and say exactly what she thought of such hard-heartedness. But she paused and stood irresolute. There was a reason why she should be slow to interfere. It was not the tiff with which she and her friend had parted on coming from the parsonage that held her back. She was an easy-going soul and had quite forgotten that. There was another and better reason making it difficult and even painful for her to men-



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tion this call—or any call—to the squire's wife.

This was the fact that Mrs. Pottle who always went first to see every newcomer never was known to go alone. She would no more have thought of doing such a thing than a royal personage would make a visit of ceremony unattended. No, indeed! She invariably invited either the widow Wall or Arabella Lightfoot to go with her, always the one or the other but never both together. When there was no need to think of looks, no special impression to be made, or when the visit was of an unpleasant or melancholy nature—as for instance on the night before—she invited the widow Wall. But when there was the least need to consider appearances, or the slightest occasion to make an impression of fashion and elegance, she invited Arabella. This distinction was natural enough considering the widow Wall's looks and Arabella's being such a fine lady. Indeed there was once some little danger that Arabella's presence might produce an impression even greater than the squire's lady expected or desired. But Arabella herself was far too tactful to allow such a mistake



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to recur. From that time on she always made a point of speaking quickly and freely of her entire and helpless reliance upon Mrs. Pottle for social guidance as well as spiritual example. And no one ever could say such graceful things quite so eloquently as Arabella.

Something of the kind touched Mrs. Pottle so deeply one day that she went straight home and reopened the argument with the squire about sending Arabella another pig. With greater spirit than ever before she told him that he should be heartily ashamed of himself for not having sent it long ago when Arabella needed it so. She also said that he need not pretend that he had forgotten it for she knew better and Arabella did too. She declared that he had not sent it simply and solely to worry her and Arabella and for no other earthly reason — not even selfishness. For what was one little mite of a pig to him when he had a whole field full? It was nothing but a shame and she vowed she would not put up with it another day. Then she asked what he expected Arabella — just by her lone self, poor thing, without a chick or a child to her name and her husband 'way off in California — to do



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with all the rich, sweet milk of a fine young cow, with not a sign of a pig to give it to. Just to think of all that nice bonnyclabber going to waste too when there were plenty of hungry people — to say nothing of pigs — who would be more than glad to get it! Why! she cried, it was little short of a sin to let such things go on so and they should not, for she meant to make a stand then and there and put down her foot. She said witheringly that maybe *he* considered such conduct becoming in a neighbor and a church member to say nothing of a deacon. For her part — so she said — it was impossible to see how he could reconcile it to his conscience as a Christian gentleman, and so long as she had breath she would feel it her duty to tell him exactly what she thought.

“And to be laughed at too,” she added now close to tears. “That’s the hardest of all. I little thought when I sent the black boys to make that cosey little pen under the maple in Arabella’s back lot and had it whitewashed like the driven snow—even down to the new hickory trough—that I was only laying myself and my best friend open to old Mrs. Crabtree’s



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fun-making. For she can see the pen from her window — everybody can see it, it's so white — and she sees everything. There's hardly a day goes by without my hearing something ridiculous that she says about the pen's being empty."

She paused here to catch her breath and the squire found his first chance to speak, in the quiet tone of mild irony which he always used in speaking of Arabella :

"Well! well — I really didn't know it was so bad as that," he said, shaking his big grizzled head. "But of course I've known all along that no one was to blame but myself. I freely, frankly admit that it's all my own fault. I should have given Arabella an ordinary old cow instead of giving her the finest young heifer I had — as you insisted. Then she wouldn't have had any trouble about the quantity or richness of the milk. It's too bad — too bad! Well, I'll make up for it now as best I can. She shall have another pig — that's all I can do at present to prove my regret. The pig shall go this very day — just as soon as the sun gets a little lower — so that it may not lose flesh in being driven. But — if you



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will pardon my mentioning it in this connection, my dear Madam — have you quite made up your mind whether it is also my duty as a neighbor, a Christian and a gentleman, to send somebody twice a day during the unnatural life of this honored pig — as I did during the prolonged career of his distinguished predecessor — to take the bonnyclabber to him, or him to the bonnyclabber as may suit the convenience of the fair Arabella? Kindly give me full instructions — for I don't want this pig to come as near starving as the other did through the lady's absorption in sentiment."

His wife looked over his head in icy silence as she always did when he said things of this kind. She never understood what he meant by speaking in that tone but she knew it was nothing flattering to herself or Arabella. Moreover — being a sensible woman of long marital experience — she had found it to be just as well sometimes to let him think that he had the last word in these frequent disputes over Arabella, since they invariably ended in that lady's getting whatever she wanted.

Then the squire's wife was quite right in cherishing such a friend at any cost. There



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are not many friends so loyal as Arabella was. Few of us have even one. Most of our best friends are now and then ready to question and judge what we do and that is trying, particularly when we know we are wrong. With Mrs. Pottle this was if possible more of a trial than with the rest of us who are not always quite so sure of being entirely right. There was the widow Wall for example whom Mrs. Pottle could not depend upon at all. Usually mild and manageable as a lamb, she would nevertheless flare up in the most unexpected manner at the most inconvenient times — just as she had done on the previous evening — without knowing or caring what it would lead to. Mrs. Pottle was thinking of this very thing, of how Jane Wall had behaved, as she sat there sewing and her indignation blazed anew. Under its influence she suddenly put down her work and got up and went indoors. In another moment she came out again wearing her sunbonnet, and set off along the big road with an air of decision that threw all the peeping ladies into an excited flutter.

The widow Wall who was still standing at the gate could hardly wait till she came within



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hearing: "I've been looking for you," she called with an uneasy glance at the sunbonnet, yet making an effort to speak as usual. "You're on your way up to see Phœbe's new kin of course. It's a real good idea to go before the sun gets too warm. It's just pleasantly warm—just hot enough now to make everything smell sweet. Tell Phœbe I'm coming directly —"

Mrs. Pottle broke in. She had paused and stood stiffly looking straight up the big road: "I'm not going near Phœbe's," she said coldly. "I'm going to see Arabella. She's *one* that I can always tie to—be it in joy or in sorrow. *She* never flies out without rhyme or reason and upsets all my plans, and hinders instead of helping me. No—Arabella never fails me—whatever other people do."

The widow Wall's pale face flushed painfully and her dim eyes lit with the flash of jealousy that can light the dullest. But she said nothing for a moment, merely turned and looked at the sun on her door-step.

"Yes," she then said slowly and mildly. "I reckon she's out of bed by *this* time. It's past noon. Then I haven't heard the cow lowing to



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be milked for two hours or more. So most likely Arabella *is* up — though I haven't heard her coaxing anybody to stop and do the milking for her — and I haven't seen her driving the cow into the kitchen either. And she always does that when she has to do the milking herself. That's to keep from being seen."

Mrs. Pottle whirled round: "'Pon my word, Jane Wall! I should think that you — a church member — would be ashamed to run people down and backbite a neighbor — and one that never did you — or anybody else a mite of harm. But of course you and I can't be expected to think alike about such matters. I always try to remember that you were born and bred a Methodist. For of course that makes a great difference. It gives so much more latitude and longitude in religion than I was brought up to, that I'm bound to make allowance," she said scathingly.

"Now just listen to you, Mandy Pottle," cried the widow Wall with spirit. "That's the way you always fly off the handle about nothing. Who's running down or backbiting? I haven't said a thing about Arabella that isn't gospel truth — and you know it too — though



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you pretend you don't. But I can just tell you that Arabella don't pull much wool over the squire's eyes either."

"Well — I must say, Jane Wall, that you're taking a good deal on yourself without being asked," haughtily. "Indeed I don't need you — or anybody — to tell me what my own husband thinks about my true friend — or anything else."

"That's so. Of course you know it — just as well as I do — though you try to make out you don't — because Arabella wheedles and honeys you up till you hardly know t'other from which. But I don't see that that's any reason why I shouldn't say what's true. And I'm a-going to do it too. For the squire told me with his own lips that after you had pestered him into buying back the pig that you'd pestered him into giving Arabella, he had its meat put in a separate pile in his smoke-house — just for his own satisfaction — to see when she got it all again by borrowing one piece at a time. And she did — the very last bit of it — for he *said* so and I reckon even *you* won't dispute the *squire's* word."

"Really — I don't see what concern it is" — Mrs. Pottle said with greater haughtiness.



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The widow Wall broke in recklessly: "Now —there's not the least use in your taking that high and mighty tone with me, Mandy Pottle. For it can't keep me from being a better friend to you than Arabella ever dared be. *She's* nothing to me. What do I care if she does drive the cow into the kitchen? 'Tain't *my* kitchen nor my cow either. If it was, if you ever should pester the squire into giving me a cow—even a common old mulley let alone pasture for it in his finest clover field—I can truthfully say with my hand on my heart that *I* wouldn't be ashamed to milk her. No, milking never seemed any real disgrace to *me*."

But Mrs. Pottle had reached the limit of her forbearance and now, disdaining to make any reply to this absurd outburst, she turned with silent dignity and walked on at a more rapid pace. She was in greater need of Arabella's soothing sympathy than ever. Then she was already truly distressed by this estrangement from Phœbe. In truth it hurt her very much and she felt a positive pang when—gazing yearningly up the big road—she now caught a distant glimpse of a little figure in black moving without apparent aim about the old garden.



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She paused, wondering why Phœbe should be wandering up and down the borders of spice pinks in that strange, restless way. It was all that she could do to keep from going to see what it meant. Never before had Phœbe done anything that she did not fully understand or think she did. The pang turned into a pain and she hurried on to talk the matter over with Arabella. For under the open purpose of the visit was a secret hope that this plausible lady—who lived by finding smooth ways around rough facts—might find some way to heal the breach between Phœbe and herself without her having to own that she had been in the wrong.

It was a pity that she could not know the truth. For there was no bitter memory of the dispute in Phœbe's gentle breast. Bitterness never found its way there. Indeed she did not even remember what had taken place. Her heart was too full of real troubles to leave room for imaginary ones.

She had fled into the garden when she could bear no more and was still wandering up and down, trying to regain self-control. And it was now coming back for her heart was brave and her spirit strong, and when these two go to-



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gether they are not easily or long cast down. So that after a while she felt able to return to the house and take up her task once more. She was remorseful that she had faltered — and nearly sunk — under it so soon. That should never happen again she said to herself quite sternly. She would be stronger and braver from this time on. There was a great deal to do and that helped her, as being busy does help all of us to bear much that could scarcely be borne at leisure. Doing this and that and running here and there as Mother Rowan wished, the hours passed somehow and the sun went down at last. But Phœbe's sweet face grew more and more weary though it never ceased smiling. And her soft eyes turned again and again to the golden crown that rested undimmed on the brow of the western hills. It seemed to her that the swallows were even later in circling than they had been on the evening before. And the martins were latest of all, flying high and low — mute birds of the deepest dusk — with only a single note which would have been harsh had it not foretold fair weather on the next day. That next day — and the next — and on to the unseen end! With



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this daunting thought Phoebe's heart and spirit flagged a little. Then she saw the new minister across the big road, looking at her with a smile. The light was fading, but she thought he smiled, and at once — most wonderfully — fresh courage and new strength came rushing to her. There was no more giving way on this first day.



## VIII

### ROLLING THE STONE UP-HILL

AND she awoke radiantly happy. For a sensitive nature reflects Nature's moods and the martins had kept their promise. The emerald earth was flashing through a crystal morning. It was a little later than usual for her to get up and she dressed in great haste. Yet when she came out on the front porch she could not help stopping and standing still for a moment—to drink in all the beauty and sweetness. There were roses everywhere, the garden lay close by and the blooming clover fields not far off. The fresh fragrance was like some magic wine. She felt equal now to meeting any trials that might come. With a bright smile she turned and went along the passage to the dining room, if the poor little corner of the old house in which the table stood might be called by so formal a name.



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The breakfast was ready and the table laid with care. That was a pleasant surprise and she turned to the cook in beaming gratitude. She thought it most kind of her to have taken all this trouble, considering her natural feeling toward an addition to the family which must greatly increase her work. Now the truth was that the cook had done everything for the express purpose of showing the intruders what she could do when she liked, so that they would know how much they missed when she never did it again. But of course Phœbe had no suspicion of any such deep duplicity. She believed everybody to be as sincere as she was herself. And she now thanked the cook so heartily that even that hardened deceiver felt rather ashamed for the moment. Then the little mistress said with the fine tact that a kind heart gives the simplest, that there was not a single thing left for *her* to do, unless it might be to get a bunch of spice pinks still sparkling with dewdrops to put on the table. That would take only a moment, she gayly called back over her shoulder, darting into the garden.

But that was just one moment too long. On



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coming back she found Mother Rowan already seated at the table, and looking highly indignant at having found no one to receive her. Even the sulky cook had retreated as far as the kitchen and now stood peeping at her through the half-open door. She merely nodded huffily in response to Phœbe's greeting and apology and hardly looked up. Her snapping eyes were making a close and critical survey of the table. It was easy to see that she did not like what was on it, but she said nothing until Phœbe — in a nervous flurry — offered her the dish of eggs.

"No, thank you," she said stiffly, pursing up her mouth. "I couldn't think of beginning a day that's bound to be as worrying as this day's bound to be — by eating eggs fried on both sides," she went on, raising her voice so that every word might be distinctly heard in the kitchen. "According to *my* notion of cooking the only way to make a fried egg fit to go into a human stomach is to fry it on *one* side."

Phœbe sprang up and ran to shut the kitchen door but failed to reach it in time.

The eavesdropper's head popped through the space: "Yes, M'am. To be sure. Thank



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you, M'am, for telling me," said the cook with withering sarcasm. "And are you very particular *which* side?"

That was a bad beginning and Phœbe made it worse by smiling herself. But she managed to turn her face away and she gave the cook an imploring look as she shut the kitchen door. Then, going back to her seat at the table, she admitted with disarming humility that there was room for improvement in her house-keeping. In the sweetest sincerity she said how grateful she would be for advice. With winning gentleness she pleaded that it had hardly seemed worth while to think much about the house or the food — while there had been no one except herself. But all this would be entirely different now — she beamed — with a real family of her very own to think for.

It was pretty to see the light in her soft eyes and hear the pride in her sweet voice as she said this. Yet even as she promised that everything should be just as Mother Rowan wished, she could not help looking round with a start fearing lest the cook might have overheard. There was good reason to fear more trouble from that formidable source. Thus reminded,



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Phœbe uneasily began to wonder how all the changes demanded were to be brought about without a violent breach of the domestic peace. She knew from experience that there was only one means of inducing the cook to do what she did not like. This was to give her something that she liked better than having her own way. And that was hard to do because she liked her own way so much that it was well-nigh impossible to find anything that she liked more. And the little mistress was poor though she had never realized the fact until this greatest emergency of her life — which had never been easy — had come upon her.

With a gold piece or two, or even a few bits of silver the difficulty might perhaps have been overcome. But that whole community relied singularly little upon the coin of the realm. Phœbe had never had a gold piece, the cook had never seen one and neither the mistress nor the maid ever thought of having an extra penny. So that Phœbe could only think about her clothes and wonder what she had that the cook would have. She sighed, thinking of the meagre little row of plain black garments hanging against the white wall of the shed-room.



## Rolling the Stone Up-hill

The cook would not look at anything so sombre. Her Sunday plumage was as gay as that of a bird of paradise. Then Phœbe tried to recollect just what there was among her colored things, which had been folded away when she had gone into mourning in the early spring. And so the thought of her fine white muslin strewn with moss rosebuds naturally crossed her mind. That was the prettiest thing she had ever had — or ever expected to have — and it lay now carefully folded at the very bottom of her hair-covered trunk, with delicate sprigs of sweet alyssum between the soft folds. But of course she did not think of giving *that* away. It was the very pride of her heart and its being laid aside for a year or two would make no difference in its beauty and fashion. No, she certainly had no thought of giving that away even to keep the peace. Yet in another moment a sudden fear came like an actually physical pain. What if the cook would not accept anything else!

While these troubled thoughts racked Phœbe's perplexed head her brown eyes were wistfully gazing in the old woman's face, and she was bravely doing her best to follow what she



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said. But now — with this cruel fancy — her eyes grew so misty with unshed tears that she could not see and her heart beat so fast that she could hardly hear, and much that Mother Rowan said was lost. For in all seriousness it took the utmost strength of mind and body that poor little Phœbe had to submit to this supreme sacrifice. And let none of us make light of her struggle. For who among the strongest and bravest of us can give up his most cherished possession without a cruel wrench? And this poor bit of painted muslin — a mere rosy cloud — was the most precious of her possessions. She went on miserably wondering whether she was after all bound to make the sacrifice. For a moment she thought not, but in another moment she knew that there could be no turning from the steep path in which she had set her feet. The old people must be made happy. There was no other way to make up for the wrong she had done.

Her eyes, brimming now and quite blind with tears, were still uplifted to meet the gaze of the sharp black ones, though they saw nothing but the rosebud muslin. Then suddenly she remembered how small it was and hastily



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glanced down at her own little figure thinking of the cook's size and shape. With this the absurdity of it all touched her quick sense of humor. Instantly her wet eyes lit up and began dancing, and her pretty dimples darted out of their hiding-places and began playing. The change was so sudden that it startled Mother Rowan and led her to demand with increased huffiness, what there was in bad housekeeping to laugh at.

It was lucky for Phœbe that Father Rowan called her just at that moment and she could run to see what he wanted. He already found many pretexts to call her and she was more than ready to respond. The instinctive liking between them grew fast. The merry twinkling of his kind eyes cheered her and he was emboldened by her quick response. A love of simple fun is a great bond between guileless hearts. And it forges its strong tie all the more quickly when a heart that is naturally light happens to be as heavy as Phœbe's was now. Then there were other and more subtle things drawing them together — things that both felt and neither understood. For her full heart fairly ached with its yearning to lavish



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love and service — which makes the whole happiness of a nature like hers. And his empty heart was actually starved by its craving for sympathy and tenderness — which he had sought his whole life through and never found before. Their meeting was the coming together of food and hunger, of drink and thirst. No wonder then that they became friends at sight, and that they instantly and unconsciously entered into a conspiracy against the Oppressor.

Phœbe could hardly have told what made her think Father Rowan the victim of too strict a discipline. And she knew from the outset that whatever Mother Rowan exacted was wholly for his good — or that firm lady thought so — which amounted to the same thing in his present helpless condition. Yet knowing this only caused her to feel wicked when she helped him break his wife's wise rules: it did not prevent her giving him whatever he wanted as nearly as she could. On this second morning she aided him in rebellion. Mother Rowan had hardly gone into the garden to see how much more room there would be for vegetables if all the flowers were pulled up, when Father Rowan asked Phœbe to give him his pipe



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which had been purposely put out of reach. And she not only gave it to him — laughing delightedly — but ran to fetch some of her uncle's fine tobacco. Worst of all, she also brought him a handful of ruby-red plums, though she had heard his wife forbid him to eat a morsel of fresh fruit.

“Quick!” she cried merrily: “I saw them as I ran through the kitchen — where the cook's making jelly. They are very sweet and ripe.”

“Won't she catch us?” asked the old man chuckling yet eating as fast as he could.

“Wait — I'll see,” said Phœbe going to the back window. “No — not if you make haste. She's way over at the other side of the garden. But hurry — or there won't be time for your pipe,” she added, quickly filling it with her own little fingers which had not lost their skill: “There now — be quick.”

The old man swallowed the last of the plums almost whole and eagerly seizing the pipe, began forthwith to take long deep pulls of complete content.

Phœbe hung over him breathing the smoke and enjoying it almost as much as he did:



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"My! — It does smell sweet! And it's so long since I've been near anybody that smoked. Uncle's tobacco always smelt like a flower. Smelling it now brings back the last summer evenings when we used to sit on the porch together. I wasn't lonely then."

She patted his shoulder with yearning affection. He sank deeper among the soft cushions with infinite satisfaction. They were both very happy, far happier than either had been for many a day. But nothing more was said until they heard a firm footstep on the end of the front porch. Then the old man hurriedly gave her the pipe and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand in guilty haste. She flew to put the pipe in its place on the high mantelpiece which she could barely reach by standing on tiptoe. Flying back to his side she suddenly realized that the room was full of the sweet-smelling smoke. There was no hasty way to hide that. She looked around in dismay. For the footsteps which had halted but for a moment came on. The old shoulder shrunk under her hand and she thought it trembled a little too. Her tender heart forgot fear for herself.



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"Never mind," she whispered. "It was *my* fault. Leave it to me. I'll take the whole blame."

But Mother Rowan did not notice the smoke. She was a singularly one-idead person and her mind was absorbed by something more important. Coming in she merely gave her husband the usual glance of general disapproval. She had always been almost as exacting with him as with herself in all matters of duty and conscience. But she had never been able to bring him quite up to her own Spartan standard until he had broken his leg. That mishap had greatly weakened his power of resistance and had totally taken away his former means of escape. So that after years of futile striving, she now held him in such merciless bondage as only the fanatically conscientious would ever dream of trying to impose upon the incurably irresponsible.

There came a smothered growl and a defiant look even out of his limbo. But Mother Rowan was too much absorbed to notice these either. Going straight to the tottering old wardrobe she took out her queer bonnet and her rusty veil and put them on, scorning a glimpse in



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the mirror. Then she whirled round and faced the two culprits.

“What’s the reason you haven’t got yours on already?” she demanded snapping her eyes at Phœbe. “It’s high time. The sun will get hot toward noon. And I never believe in shilly-shally anyhow. When a thing’s got to be done I always believe in doing it right off the reel. So *I’m* a-going — you can go or not as you like.”

“Where?” faltered Phœbe bewildered. “I didn’t know we were going anywhere —”

“Well, I don’t see *why* you didn’t!” said Mother Rowan, tartly. “I shouldn’t think you — or anybody else — would need to be told that I’m not the sort of stepmother to sit down and take my ease in this house, or any other, without knowing where my stepson’s buried.”

“Oh!” Phœbe began to tremble but she said steadily enough that she would go at once, just as soon as she could get her bonnet.

“And your crape veil too — if you’ve got one,” Mother Rowan called after her as she ran along the porch to the shed-room.



## IX

### AN EARLY ORDEAL

NOBODY, knowing that remote spot and its set ways, would have doubted that Phœbe had a veil and wore it strictly according to rule. Everybody there always did that in everything. Moreover there was one particular veil which might have been said to belong to the entire feminine community. At all events it had been worn in turn by every lady who had gone into black for years and years back. Indeed had any one among them thought of buying a veil of her own, she would have been considered almost as exclusive as she was extravagant.

Most likely none of this famous veil's more recent wearers could have told how old it was, or where it had come from originally, or whose it had been in the first place. It had been public property too long for anybody to remember. But everybody who was old enough knew that



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it had been worn many years before by the widow Wall. That fact had been made memorable by the general surprise that — under the circumstances — she should have felt like going into such deep mourning. It had hardly been expected that she would mourn at all, poor soul. And she herself, being as sincere then as always, had not pretended anything that she could not feel. She had merely said with an honest sigh of relief that what she had had to put up with was now past and gone. Then let bygones be bygones. But duty was duty — just the same — she had added loyally, declaring that her own feelings should never prevent the doing of hers. “No;” she had said cheerfully: “I won’t pretend to be sorry, but I will wear the veil just to show a suitable resentment.”

And wear it she did and for a long time too, so long indeed that the other ladies grew uneasy and began to wonder how they were ever going to get her to take it off. There was always a little anxiety lest some one else should need it while it was in use. Then it certainly was not right that any one wearer should wear it out. And all the ladies could see that the veil was becoming almost as limp as the widow



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Wall's own things. Yet the subject was a delicate one and not easy to approach. Even Mrs. Pottle who rarely hesitated hardly knew what to do and she was greatly concerned feeling her responsibility. For she was naturally the custodian of the veil as of everything else belonging to the community. Finally she called a secret meeting at her own house, to discuss ways and means for saving the veil without wounding the tender sensibilities of the widow Wall. The ladies talked the matter over thoroughly, but not one of them was willing to speak to her about it. They all liked and felt sorry for her because of her trials. And she, wholly unaware of the public's uneasiness, had innocently gone on wearing the veil till old Mrs. Crabtree, suddenly and unasked, solved the problem out of hand as she did most things, and without consulting anybody.

She cared nothing for the veil nor the widow Wall either for that matter. But of course she knew of the conclave—as she knew of everything that went on—though she had not been invited and cared too little to be miffed at being left out. It was merely on a sudden, idle impulse that she hailed the squire one day



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— as he drove by on the stroke of the clock as he always did — and asked him clear across the big road why the veil was like charity. The heartless jest meant nothing worse than that the widow Wall was a bit untidy. She knew this and also knew that it was true. But that did not make it hurt any the less, since she — poor thing — was much like the rest of us and we are all most hurt by the truth.

The sting of it had spurred her to greater energy than she had ever been known to show before or since. She never wore the veil again and had at once set about doing what she could to restore its freshness. There were regular and elaborate rules for doing this. These she had carried out to the letter, finally pinning the veil on her bed to dry. When it had dried she had rolled it round the nice clean piece of broomstick which always went along with the veil, to prevent creases from folding after it had been newly stiffened.

“And it’s just as stiff as it ought to be — not a mite stiffer — let that old game-maker say what she’s a mind to,” the widow Wall had said proudly, looking for her denuded bonnet. The sight of it had made her sigh,



## An Early Ordeal

yet nevertheless she had tied its shabby strings quite firmly under her pointed chin and had set off at once down the big road waving the crape-wound broomstick like a grewsome wand. For she wanted everybody to see that the veil was going back as good as new. Drawing near old Mrs. Crabtree's window — which was called the watch-tower — she had gone beyond the shade and had taken the heat of the sun, rather than risk not being seen through the low boughs. She had looked straight ahead too ignoring the old lady's friendly nod. All that she had asked of anybody just then was to take notice that she was doing her whole duty, and that the veil was ready for the next wearer.

It would be hard to tell how many these wearers were first and last. For they were not merely the widows of whom there could be only a few in so small a place. Nor were they confined to the old houses standing beneath the older trees. The veil's sad service went much farther than the limits of the hamlet. Its dark shadow sometimes fell clear across the wide green fields, stretching even



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beyond the high green hills. For it is still another Law of Life, that the widest fields and the highest hills can never shut in the ever lengthening Shadow.

And so, after all these years, it had come at last to cover poor little Phœbe's curly head. She was wearing it just as all the others had worn it except that she was so very small and the veil was so very large. Its long folds fell nearly to her feet quite concealing her little figure. Indeed as she came out of the shed-room swathed in it on that June morning, she looked like a large-eyed child, frightened by the darkness of a woman's sorrow. But she was not thinking of her own looks or of herself at all, as she ran along the porch and out to the gate. For she saw that Mother Rowan was already standing there waiting, with an indignant protest in every angle of her angular back. Phœbe was afraid to say anything had she known what to say. But she hastily lifted the latch and stood back while Mother Rowan passed through and they set off under the trees along the big road.

It appeared to be deserted. There was no one in sight and the sole sound that broke the



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sunny stillness was the singing of the larks in the meadows. But Phœbe was not deceived for a moment. She knew as well as if she had been able to see them, that all the neighbors were watching through the morning-glories which covered their front porches. And she knew that it was only natural that they should wish to get a look at a stranger whose coming had caused such a stir. She did not blame them in the least, especially as very few had had even a distant glimpse of the newcomers on the day before. The stage had come earlier than they had expected. For some mysterious reason it always did come either earlier or later than anybody was looking for it, whenever there was any special interest in its arrival. Sometimes this was so marked and so trying, that some of them half thought that Hillery Kibbey did it on purpose to give himself still greater importance. But nobody really believed anything of the kind because Hillery was always good-nature itself, and nothing could possibly have made him of more importance than he was anyway.

Knowing all this made Phœbe feel very ill at ease. She could not help glancing nervously



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toward the morning-glories and then quickly up at the gaunt, tall figure and the strange, small head towering above her own. Yet with this single swift glance her tender conscience smote her tenderer heart. She felt ashamed of caring—even for an instant—for what the neighbors might think or say. What could it matter! Looks were of very small consequence when a woman was as good as she knew Mother Rowan to be. As Phœbe said this to herself there was a quick toss of the pretty head under the crape veil and it was suddenly held higher. If the neighbors did not know how good Mother Rowan was—how noble and unselfish her whole life had been—then she would tell them and before that very sun went down too. Thinking this she loyally drew closer to her silent companion's side, almost forgetting to be afraid. Then she made up her mind to talk so that the keenest eyes following them might see that she was quite happy and wholly at ease. She was already rather out of breath trying to keep up with Mother Rowan's long stride, but she began talking at once with all the voice and spirit she could muster. And feeling that she had been harsh in her judgment, the very first thing she



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said was about the kindness of the neighbors. There never were kinder people anywhere in the whole world, she declared with all her heart. Possibly the squire and Mrs. Pottle might be a little kinder than the others but that, she said warmly, was only because they had more to be kind with. Then she spoke fervently of Mrs. Pottle's goodness to herself, wishing that she could stop and see her without the least consciousness of any change in their relations. But they were passing Arabella's now and of course Phœbe spoke with enthusiasm of Mrs. Pottle's goodness to the Argonaut's lady.

"And the squire is just as kind though he's always laughing at her in that queer, dry way of his," Phœbe sighed while she smiled. "It's a real shame. I don't see how he or anybody can have the heart to make fun of Arabella. It's all so pitiful. My aunt laughs about her rubbing her cheeks with rose leaves. But they really do give a lovely color—if you rub hard enough. And Arabella is very much afraid of getting pale. She says her husband thought she had a beautiful complexion and she can't bear to have him find any change when he



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comes back. But the saddest thing of all is that some people think he never will come. Some even think he's dead — that he died long ago. It's been years and years since Arabella had a letter or heard one word. But she will not listen to anything of the kind and doesn't lose heart at all. She's always sure that his letter will come in the very next mail — if he doesn't come himself."

She turned suddenly and pushed back the veil trying to see whether her companion was interested or even listening. But she could not tell for Mother Rowan was looking away toward the distant hills. Yet all those keen eyes were still watching through the morning-glories and she had to go on:

"That's why Arabella's always dressed up in the very best she can get — as if for a party. She says it would break her heart not to be looking her prettiest if the captain should come when least expected. So that the only way to be ready at any minute is to dress up in her finest clothes every day, the whole year round and year after year, and sit there by the window — waiting and watching — always looking the way the Argonauts went," she said with a sudden



## An Early Ordeal

uneasy side glance, chilled by the lack of any response. Then she went on still more timidly: "Sometimes I can hardly bear to see her there —"

"She'd a sight better get out of that chair and stir round and clean up her house. I'll lay it needs it," Mother Rowan broke in. "For my part I've always found that with plenty of work to do there's no time to mope. And I never had any patience with moping — though I've had some disappointment to bear myself —"

"Oh — but she *doesn't*," protested Phœbe. "She's as light-hearted as can be — never sad a moment — as I said just now. She has a smile and something lively to say to everybody that goes by. And indeed there isn't a busier woman in the whole neighborhood. Why! she sews the whole time while she sits there expecting the captain any minute. You'd never know Mrs. Pottle's things after Arabella makes them over. And I do wish you could see the crimped ruffles on the petticoats that she wears every day. They are so dainty that nobody can do them up but Mrs. Pottle's parlor maid."

"What's the reason she can't do 'em up herself — if she's bound to have 'em?"



## The Little Hills

“Who? *Arabella?*”

Then she waited, thinking that she could not have heard aright. However nothing more was said and they walked on in silence for a while. But the constraint grew with every step till Phœbe was too much frightened to endure it any longer, and helplessly took up the same subject because she could think of no other less likely to offend. And having taken it up she talked on because she was afraid to stop.

“Some people do think Arabella is a little lazy — but that is a great mistake,” she began timidly. “It’s true that she never gets up early, but that is because she sits up so late — thinking the captain may come in the night-time. Sometimes I wake and see the light of her candle in the window shining far down the big road. Somehow it makes my heart ache. The widow Wall says that she went over there one night just to find out for once what Arabella *was* a-doing, so long after everybody else was a-bed and asleep, and found her ironing out the pretty blue ribbon bows that she always wears on her nightgown. She just laughed — bright and happy as could be — and



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told the widow Wall that blue was for true — and that she wasn't going to be caught with mussed ribbons looking plain and dowdy — no matter what time of night the captain might come. And maybe he wouldn't wait for the stage — she half thought he would not."

She broke off turning very red, feeling much embarrassed and wholly unable to tell whether Mother Rowan's loud scornful sniff was intended for Arabella or herself. At all events it made her feel as if she had said something improper.

"What do you suppose I care for all that foolishness," demanded Mother Rowan abruptly, turning with fiercely snapping eyes. "What's this Arabella woman to me? I don't want to hear anything about her. I want to hear about poor William's funeral."

Phœbe could not speak at once. The mention of that name always struck her dumb, and set her quivering as if something icy had touched her warm heart. But she strove with all her might and — gathering courage — managed somehow to tell all that could be told in words. When the telling began she paused unconsciously and Mother Rowan also



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stood still. They were now well up the hillside and could look down and far over the fields which had been so tenderly green on that day of early spring, and which were richly golden now and rippling softly as the shadows swam after the sunbeams through the shining seas of ripened grain. But Phœbe's eyes were too full of tears to see anything except the memory that her faint words brought back. And then Mother Rowan moved on saying there was no need to waste time in talking, that they could talk just as well walking along. Thus they went forward and climbed to the very top of the high hill and passed through the little gate of the graveyard and crossed it — that utter desolation of a country burial-place — to the farther side where the grass was greener and shorter, so that the wind did not sigh through it quite so mournfully, and where the three graves lay under the caressing branches of the silvery beech.

“Here he lies,” breathed Phœbe. “That's his grave — the longest one. See how close — how very close to my father and mother.”

For a moment her sad eyes sank down to the mound of mortality, but a sudden sound



## An Early Ordeal

from Mother Rowan caused her to look up. The expression of that strange, small face startled and alarmed her. Before she could think what it meant a raging torrent of wrath burst from those whitened lips. Shocked and overwhelmed by the unexpectedness and violence of the outburst, she recoiled and stood in quivering silence blindly putting out her hand to the tree. She had a confused sense of being swept into depths that she had never sounded—of being cast upon cruel rocks that she could not see. For a while it was all bewildered pain and terror, all utterly beyond comprehension. Her clearest feeling was that this terrible stranger with the convulsed face surely must be mad. She desperately looked round for some means of escape. But her terrified gaze went back to those blazing eyes as the fierce words began to assume bitter meaning.

“There! *There*—there under that fence!” cried Mother Rowan almost in a shriek. “You’ve put him in a little out-of-the-way place like *that*—where I can’t get at him! You’ve penned him up in a little corner where there’s no room to set up a shingle with his



## The Little Hills

name on it—much less the large, handsome tombstone that I've bought for him with my hard-earned money. That's what you've done for him! And just to spite me! How'd you dare? *You* didn't bring him up like your own son, yet you've come—interfering—between me and him—like this—after all these years. How'd you *dare*! I had set my heart on putting that stone at his head, so that I might be sure of doing my best from first to last—sure of being able to stand out before the common run of stepmothers and *say* so—when I come to face the Bar on the Day of Judgment.”

Phœbe let go the bough by which she was holding herself up and sank down to the grass. Faint and sick, she was too much frightened to attempt to defend herself had she known in the least what to say or even understood. She covered her white face with her trembling hands and wept as if her heart must surely break. After this came a tense silence broken only by her helpless sobbing. Had she been less overcome, less awed and able to lift her head or see through her blinding tears, she would have seen that Mother Rowan was weep-



## An Early Ordeal

ing too. For her gaunt frame was shaken by the fierce, bitter grief of the hardly moved. And that is always fiercer and bitterer than any feeling that the easily touched can ever know. To the narrow-minded and one-ideal every defeat must be a tragedy, for the reason that to them the missing of a single aim means more often than not the loss of everything worth having or doing in life. And so it was now with this stern, honest, strenuous soul. She had lost the one thing that she really prized, the privilege of paying her stepson a last honor which all might see. It was not that she loved him. Love was not in her nature to give nor in his to inspire. But this hard, unloving service had been from first to last the highest thing that she could see—the one lofty, white shining peak—lifting above the dreary level of her humble existence. And its very pinnacle was to have been marked by this great white stone—for which she had given all that she had in the whole world.



## X

### THE RESCUE

AT last even the sobs ceased and in the strained stillness the crackling of a dry twig sounded very loud. Phœbe looked up with a start and saw the new minister coming round an evergreen. There was no time to recover herself for he was barely a rod away. But she sprang to her feet brushing the crushed grass from her skirt, and bravely did her best to meet him as though nothing had happened. She could not control the big tears still clinging to her long lashes, nor stop the quivering of her lips for all their brave smiling. And the flush that flew over her pale face did nothing to conceal its distress. So that the little smile which she managed to give him was a most wistfully piteous one.

It went straight to his heart. Indeed the



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very first glimpse of her had done that. Nevertheless he was sorry for having come, sorry that he had not stayed unseen on the other side of the evergreen or gone away without intruding. For he suddenly felt guilty of an unpardonable intrusion. Perhaps it was the way Mother Rowan looked at him, the open hostility with which she squared herself that made him feel this. Certainly nothing could have been more unmistakable than the challenge of her look. The rudest words could not have demanded his business more sharply than those snapping black eyes. But he hardly noticed them. He saw only that shrinking little figure in black; only that appealing little face which quickly paled again under his intent gaze; only that sweet little mouth still so sensitively a-quiver though trying hard to smile steadily; only those tender little hands fluttering like frightened white birds, till he could hardly help taking them and holding them in protecting tenderness.

Yet there was nothing for him to do except stammer out such a confused apology as he was able to offer: "We happened to be passing — my aunt and I," he said hesitatingly. "We



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have been to the woods on the other side of the hill. And seeing you — that is — I thought that perhaps you weren't well and might need some assistance."

"Well, we don't," broke in Mother Rowan tartly. "Neither of you need stay another minute on our account. You — and your aunt — can go right along home."

It was not easy for Phœbe to introduce them after that but she did — somehow — and managed moreover to say that he and his aunt were very kind.

"There she is now," he said quickly, turning with an air of relief. "She's just over there beyond that evergreen. Here Aunt Alice!" raising his voice. "This way — here we are."

Then the three of them stood silent for a moment looking at Miss Dale. She was not far away and had come in sight, but made no response nor a sign that she was aware of their presence. Drawing nearer to a trumpet-vine which had overrun a dead tree-trunk she paused to look at it. And indeed it was well worth looking at — this wonderful and beautiful symbol of life after death — this marvellous growth and magnificent flowering out of mortal



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dust. But Miss Dale was not thinking about anything of that kind, nor even of the rich green foliage with its splendid scarlet flowers. She was merely wondering why these flaming trumpets were swarming with myriads of small red ants. She was trying to find out where they came from and what they were doing. But she left off at her nephew's second call. There were very few things that she would not give up for him — temporarily. Meeting Phœbe halfway with cordially extended hand she really seemed to see her for a moment. Then she went toward Mother Rowan — gently shoved by the minister — and fully meant to shake hands with her too. But there was no meeting halfway this time and she forgot everything in watching a bird's singing flight.

“Look, John,” she cried instantly all alive with interest. “Run round that tree and try to see where it goes. Did you notice where it came from? Maybe its nest is somewhere near — and I can get a look at the eggs. I'd like to have one on my string.”

Mother Rowan moved off and stood grimly squaring herself, scorning even silent indorsement of such folly. “At her age too — older'n



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I am — gray as a badger — and a-cutting such capers," she muttered.

This was all lost so far as Miss Dale was concerned but it made Phœbe uneasy. Her brown eyes were very anxious indeed — till they met the new minister's and saw how frankly his gray ones were smiling. Then hers began dancing though they were not quite dry — there was the prettiest flutter of dimples — and the last trace of embarrassment vanished like light clouds under a burst of sunshine. All at once they both felt unaccountably at ease and happy. Neither could have told how or why it was, for neither knew anything of the miraculous change that love can bring about in the space of the lightning's flash. Not a thought of falling in love had crossed her mind, it was too deeply absorbed in penance for not loving. And he was barely beginning to believe that he loved her; he had not been able to see her often enough to feel quite sure. Nevertheless a pair of strong, clear gray eyes and a pair of shy, sweet brown ones can say and hear a great deal in one swift meeting with a speedy parting. And theirs had spoken and responded as frankly and freely as honest,



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innocent eyes ever did. There was a new brightness in hers and she smiled gayly while he laughed aloud for pure happiness, in turning now to see what the old ladies were doing.

As they looked back Miss Dale came round the tree and absently linked her arm in Mother Rowan's for no other reason than that it was at hand, and calmly unconscious that it belonged to an iron image of scorn. However, the touch on the rigid arm seemed to bring it to life, and Mother Rowan at once stalked off down the hillside with no more notice of Miss Dale than if she had been an empty basket hanging on her arm. And she did not pause or even glance back when the hand suddenly let go to chase some other atom of life that crept or flew.

It was a sight to make the soberest smile but Phœbe's soft heart would not let her laugh long. "It doesn't seem quite kind or respectful," she said vaguely.

"Well, it's certainly absurd," he said. "Science itself can never make the chase of bugs and butterflies anything else in grown people, and Aunt Alice hasn't much notion of being



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scientific. Still, after all I suppose, this form of the mania — the one that she suffers from doesn't do any actual harm."

"Except to the poor butterflies," said Phœbe thinking of the row of frail little bodies that she had seen cruelly pinned on the parsonage wall.

He shook his head: "We can only hope that they don't feel a pang as great as when a giant dies. But I can't see how we are to know. There seems to be no way to get the butterflies' own point of view," he went on laughing and growing serious in the same breath. "Indeed the matter is rather a problem with me. Not on the victim's account. I'm afraid I don't think much about that. The thing perplexing me is my own responsibility."

She looked up surprised and made grave by his sudden gravity.

"You see it's like this. My aunt cares for nothing else — except myself — and never has felt any interest in anything but nature study in her whole life so far as I know. Yet she will give up even that — temporarily and partly — for me, and it does seem ungrateful and selfish on my side not to feel and show some sympathy



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with the only thing that she really cares for — outside myself — yet I can't. Sometimes I try to pretend but she always finds me out. I'm such a poor pretender," he said more lightly. "Then — to tell the whole truth — I am actually afraid to have anything to do with nature study."

Her brown eyes were very wide indeed now, and again lifted to his face.

He looked down at her in the half-earnest, half-jesting way that she had already learned to like and was fast beginning to understand: "Because I'm a minister and pledged to the service of my own kind."

"I don't know what you mean."

"That loving Nature more makes us love Humanity less."

"How in the world can that be? I don't believe it — nor that you do either," she said with shy gayety.

"In all earnestness — yes — I do. And so would you if you were to think about the matter and look into it as I have done."

She wondered silently and her uplifted face no longer smiled.

"Of course you know that I am not speaking of our full appreciation — yours and mine



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—of those golden fields and these wild flowers and that butterfly's gorgeous beauty," he said. "We would be poor creatures — and blind ones too — without that. The thing that I mean is something quite different. I am speaking of that curiously intolerant, imperviously selfish, narrowly self-sufficient being called a Naturalist. Why, in order even to *gain* that doubtful title he must draw away from the brotherhood of man — clear out of sympathy with it — and go all alone nosing after Nature. And his pursuit of her through a lifetime has never — in my judgment — brought any real benefit to mankind. So standing aloof he strikes a pose of superiority and — shirking all that he owes to humanity — looks down on his fellow-creatures' hardest striving. That's the attitude of the Naturalist. There's only one exception so far as I know. White of Selborne was a good man. But I can't help thinking that his parishioners must have had cause of complaint. And worst of all is the Naturalists' unsleeping, undying jealousy. They seem to decry and distrust each other rather more than the rest of mankind. Indeed they seldom admit each other's love. As for anything like



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a real intimacy on the part of another with the Lady-love — perish the presumption! It's only when a Naturalist dies that the others grant him even a passing acquaintance with Nature."

"Surely —" protested Phœbe. "That cannot be true. There are valuable facts about plants and animals."

His smiling gaze bantered her. "Well, the Naturalist *has* pried out of a few of his lady-love's secrets that may be useful to his brother. But I can't name one just now. And to serve his fellow-man was certainly not the object of the search. At all events I am quite sure that he never has said a kind word for his brother or his sister either. He *can't*, you see! He's compelled to belittle humanity's dues and deny its demands, in order to justify his own shameless neglect of duty to his kind. But that sounds like preaching and this is vacation for both of us."

She pressed the point, unwilling to let it go so dimly understood.

He took a slip of paper from his pocket: "This admits — in a great Naturalist's own words — the very charge that I have just made. It comes from a new book written by a man



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named Thoreau. Listen carefully—for this is much better said than I could say it: ‘After all what does the practicalness of life amount to? The things immediate to be done are very trivial. I could postpone them all to hear this locust sing.’ There! *That’s* what I mean. Think of coming under such an influence. Do you still wonder that I fear it? For you must remember that there is a special obligation upon me—and all my cloth—to work for our faith and for humanity with head and hands as well as heart and soul.”

She murmured that perhaps the writer did not mean just what he had said.

“Perhaps not,” he granted, smiling. “But that is their tone and pose. They live to celebrate the turning of a polliwog into a frog, and to ridicule man’s bravest climbing over the little hills of life.”



## XI

### MRS. CRABTREE'S CALL

OF course they were seen coming as well as going. There could be no unseen passing over the big road in daylight. The kind people living in the old houses under the great trees felt too great an interest in their good neighbors for that. Then there was so little to see that anybody's going by made an event. But it was not often that such a visible, audible flutter flew along the entire leafy length of the street, as now fluttered after this little group.

It had been strange and unexpected enough to see Phœbe start out so early in the morning. The good housekeepers were so taken by surprise at first that they could hardly believe their own eyes. They all instinctively turned and looked at the morning-glories, those floral clocks which are never wrong when the sun shines. There was no mistake, the transparent



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blue bugles were still blowing silently even on the sunniest side of the front porches. In the shady fence corners plenty of primroses too were still wide open—and every golden cup brimming with dew. Thrusting the vines aside, the housewives shook their puzzled heads at one another. What in the world could Phœbe mean? The beds were not yet made, not even Mrs. Pottle's and her house was always in perfect order before anybody else had begun to sweep. Then she had many servants while Phœbe had only one, a sulky cook who never did anything that she could help and with the two newcomers now to wait upon. Puzzled and disapproving comments were exchanged in low tones through the morning-glories over the whitewashed fences after Phœbe and Mother Rowan had gone beyond hearing.

But most of the ladies were still busy with their own household duties, and the general excitement lulled till Phœbe's return caused it to break out afresh and even more violently than before. Indeed a head came quite through the morning-glories here and there and the neighbors rarely forgot their manners so far



## Mrs. Crabtree's Call

as that. But then the boughs hung so low as quite to cut off the view at the turn of the big road. And so they could hardly credit what they saw — looking straight at the three ladies and the gentleman now in sight. For none of them knew the new minister very well. He had kept to himself in a way that they were unused to and did not like. Most of them would have said that Phœbe hardly knew him at all. Yet there he and she came, walking down the big road side by side laughing and talking, with his head bent very close to hers. No wonder that the morning-glories were fluttering as if suddenly stirred by the wings of many startled birds. And close behind were the minister's queer aunt whom they all called "a fly-up-the-creek" — and who looked like a blurred ambrotype — peering vaguely into the fence corners; and the tall stranger with the small head and the grim face — who walked like a soldier — never once glancing beyond her own straight path. Some of the spectators were thrown so far off their polite balance as to think of following the party to Phœbe's house, in order to find out what it meant. But in another moment they knew that this would never do.



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And then there was Mrs. Pottle who had not given a sign of what she intended in regard to these new relations of Phœbe's.

So that nobody dared move in the matter till the spirit of contrariness suddenly seized old Mrs. Crabtree. She had hardly thought of her niece's grave undertaking beyond laughing at it. But she happened to be more idle and bored than usual that day — sitting beside the open window — when she saw Phœbe and those who were with her. And she noticed the agitation of the morning-glories that followed their passing. In the dearth of any other entertainment this amused her a little, and it presently occurred to her that there might be more amusement in taking a closer look at the old folks who had "feathered in" on Phœbe. The inert old lady was subject to somewhat energetic impulses at long and irregular intervals, and usually acted upon them without delay. And she did so now. Getting out of her low chair with some difficulty she did not call her daughter from the next room to fetch her bonnet, but took up an old parasol which chanced to be lying near. With this in her hand she went sideways down the front steps.



## Mrs. Crabtree's Call

At the gate she opened the parasol and found that one of its lean ribs stood out quite bare of silk. But there was enough left to cover her handsome old head and she never allowed a trifle to stand in the way of her amusing herself. Then the sun was only pleasantly warm as yet.

The earth was moist and cool from the night's shower, and the air was sweet with the scent of the wet clover-blossoms that reddened the meadows lying close by. In the gardens behind the houses the flowers were freshly fragrant. Old Mrs. Crabtree drank in all this beauty and sweetness, walking along the middle of the big road in order to see both sides. Moving slowly and heavily, for she was short and stout and lazy as well as old, she lost nothing of the neighbors' domestic affairs, that were to be seen through the open windows and doors. Passing the squire's house she saw Mrs. Pottle quite distinctly — still bustling about — and that alert lady saw her too. But the only greeting exchanged between them was an offhand nod on the one side and a stiff bow on the other. That was just what old Mrs. Crabtree wanted. She chuckled till her



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shapely bulk shook, knowing as well as if she had had eyes in the back of her handsome old head, that Mrs. Pottle — very much flustered — was peeping through her parlor curtains at that very moment trying to see where she was going.

Other eyes also were following her with more open curiosity. For she very seldom left her own house and hardly ever walked. Moreover everybody was afraid of her and we all feel a particularly keen interest in everything done by those whom we fear. The widow Wall was so taken aback on seeing her that she nearly dropped the little basket of green peas which she had been gathering. That would have been too bad for they were the first to ripen in the whole neighborhood. All the other pea-vines were still more white than green with a snowy fringe of scented bloom. And she meant to give these earliest, tenderest peas to Phœbe. Even a handful of sweet and tender peas would help now that the poor child had so many to provide for and so little to do it with. Then — so the widow Wall said to herself — Mandy Pottle would hear of the present and it should teach her that some



## Mrs. Crabtree's Call

people had the spunk to do what they liked with their own, no matter how overbearing she might try to be. Yes, poor little Phœbe was going to have this first basketful of green peas, be the consequences what they might. At these boldly rebellious thoughts, this forlorn wisp of harmless humanity stood very straight among the blossoming vines. She dumbly declared again that Mandy Pottle should see that even a poor widow with nobody to take her part, had some pride and feelings and knew how to stand up for them too. No, Mandy Pottle was not going to have her own way in everything all the time hereafter, no matter what she might say and do. In the excitement of this desperate resolve she flung up her head and fell to picking the peas faster than ever. But it was just at this moment that she caught sight of old Mrs. Crabtree and forgot everything else. Hastily setting down the basket she ran round the house, and clear out into the middle of the big road without remembering that she would be seen. The sun was in her eyes, but she managed to see by shading them with her hands. And so she stood till there could be no more doubt about



## The Little Hills

the old lady's actual turning in at Phœbe's gate.

"Ah — ha!" the widow Wall cried aloud quite recklessly, feeling for the moment almost a liking for old Mrs. Crabtree: "*There* now, Mandy Pottle! After this we'll all see who is mistress and whether a body may breathe when she pleases or not!" running back to the garden in great haste to finish gathering the peas, so that she might take them to Phœbe and find out just what the old lady said and did.

Meantime Mrs. Crabtree was going straight ahead without paying the least attention to the stir which her appearance had created, though she saw it plainly enough. And she would not let Phœbe turn back when she met her at the gate starting out on an errand. Indeed she was rather pleased at the prospect of seeing the newcomers without any chance of interference with her investigation. There was no sign of them however, when she reached the porch and took her own time to subdue the unruly rib of the parasol. She got it down at last and used the stick as a cane in making her difficult way up the steps. There were two large rocking-chairs on the porch and



## Mrs. Crabtree's Call

she dropped heavily into the larger. It was a moment or so before her breath came back. When it had come she untied her bonnet-strings and threw them over her shoulders. Then she pounded loudly on the porch floor with the handle of the parasol. She must have been startled by the promptness of the response had she been at all nervous. For Mother Rowan sprang up in the front door as if she had been shot there by a powerful spring. But old Mrs. Crabtree was not nervous and the instantaneous snapping of those hostile black eyes pleased her at once.

"How-d'y," she drawled in her charming voice: "I'm Phœbe's aunt. You, I presume, are her husband's mother."

"*You* can call me that if you want to," said Mother Rowan. "But *my* way is to call things by their true names. There's no reason that I know of, to make me deny being poor William's stepmother. Do you know of any?"

"Bless me! No," cried old Mrs. Crabtree, glad she had come.

But Mother Rowan gave her no time to say anything more. She darted out on the porch and popped into the other chair, whirling it



## The Little Hills

round so that she faced the enemy squarely, toe to toe and eye to eye.

“For if you — or anybody else — did know a thing or a time that I didn’t do my best by him in — I’d just like to hear what and when it was.”

“My dear Madam,” said Mrs. Crabtree looking blandly over her spectacles. “Why! I’ve always been on the stepmother’s side.”

“Well, *I* haven’t!” Mother Rowan said fiercely. “The common run of ’em deserve what they get. I’ve never had any use for the tribe and I’ve always despised to be mixed up with ’em. I *won’t* either and never would be. That’s the reason I was so particular about doing what I could for poor William. From the very minute I married his father when he wasn’t more than six months old —”

“Oh!” old Mrs. Crabtree could not help breaking in. “You certainly got an early start if there’s anything in that.”

“’Twasn’t *my* place to mourn for his first wife,” Mother Rowan retorted with a fiery jerk of her small head toward the room in which the old man sat. “I had *my* hands full — a-mourning for my own first husband. And my child not much older than his.”



## Mrs. Crabtree's Call

"Then honors were easy," said old Mrs. Crabtree affably, looking under her spectacles this time. She was beginning to enjoy herself very much indeed.

Mother Rowan knew nothing about whist but there was something in the tone of this reference that made her suspicious. She scanned the fine, bland old face before her very sharply before going on: "And I *did* mourn for him just the same as if he hadn't been as good as dead for years. Long sickness and worrying peevishness never made the difference with me that they do with some people. I've a mighty poor opinion of any woman that won't do her best — no matter what she feels — so long as she can stand on her feet and has strength in her arms and breath in her body. That kind of woman — and there are plenty of 'em — is just as despicable to me as the common run of stepmothers. There can never be any charge of shirking brought against me. No, sir-ree! I stood up to my duty through thick and thin and I wore mourning a full year, for I kept on wearing it after I married *him*. He didn't care and it wouldn't have mattered if he had. I always do what I think is right no



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matter who likes it, and who don't. But he was a bit down-hearted too — left alone with a baby and a sickly one at that. My Mary was hearty yet I never made a mite of difference between 'em. I can say *that* for myself now — and say it again when I come to hold up my right hand before the Great Bar."

An uneasy shade crossed old Mrs. Crabtree's face. She saw the strange look of exaltation, the same that Phœbe had seen, and understood it better. It gave her a glimpse of a benighted soul striving through mists toward some dimly lighted height. And that was most disquieting. It made her think and she did not wish to think — only to be amused. This was not at all amusing. She turned with a yawn and looked down the big road, meaning to start home as soon as she felt a little more rested.

Mother Rowan's gaze also wandered yet her thoughts held fast to the subject that absorbed her. It was ever easy to turn them to it and hard to turn them from it. Her voice had softened and grew almost gentle as she went on: "The hardest part was to get somebody to take care of the two children



## Mrs. Crabtree's Call

while I was teaching school nearly a mile away. For I had to help make the living. *He* never had any knack for making money. Mary could have got along somehow—she was such a pine knot—but William couldn't. He was real puny and needed lots of strong medicine and warm clothes. And he had 'em—that he did—so far as I could earn what he needed. But I had to leave home nearly all day to do it. Of course *he* was always ready to offer to stay with the children. But my back was no sooner turned than he was off to the groggery. At first while the children were little I tied them to the bedposts—one at the head and one at the foot—to keep 'em out of the fire. Then I used to put molasses on their little hands and gave them both a nice fuzzy white feather. Picking it from one hand to the other kept 'em real busy till I got back."

"It must have. I can't imagine any more inexhaustible source of entertainment."

"Other times before they had any jaw teeth, I would take two nice pieces of fat bacon—both exactly the same size—and tie them fast to the ends of two clean, strong strings.



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Then I used to tie the other end of one of these strings to each child's big toe. Fixed that way they *couldn't* choke themselves no matter how hard they might try to swallow the chunks whole. For just as soon as they began to choke they'd begin to kick — jerking the strings — and up the bacon was bound to come."

"So that they *could* eat their cake and have it too."

"They never had a mite o' cake," said Mother Rowan sharply. "Mary might have had it just as well as not. She could digest anything that she could swallow. But William couldn't and I never made any difference nor let her have one single thing that he didn't have. There's nobody —"

"Certainly — yes — of course not, I'm sure," said old Mrs. Crabtree hastily, having no notion of being made sad again. "And what else did you do?"

There was an air of flattering interest in the way this was said.

Mother Rowan was momentarily disarmed: "Well — I hardly knew what to do as they got to be bigger and the spring came on.



## Mrs. Crabtree's Call

Then the doctor said William must play out of doors and I didn't know which way to turn till Uncle Sandy—a most respectable black man—was put in jail. You see one wall of the jail came right up to our side yard so that he could see the children at play. But I never would have thought of asking him to take care of them, if he hadn't hollowed at 'em without being asked one day when he saw 'em doing something *mischevous*. That put the plan in my head and I couldn't have hit on a better one. Uncle Sandy staid by the window looking down through the bars the whole time I was gone to school. He could because he hadn't anything else to do. Once when William got strangled on a bean he called the preacher who happened to be going by and sent him running for me. And I did my part by Uncle Sandy too. I never believe in taking anything for nothing. Many's the big plate of good hot victuals right off the fire that I handed up to him through the jail window. Yes, and more than one whole pie to boot."

"There couldn't be any doubt about your keeping your side of any bargain," Mrs. Crabtree said with entire sincerity.



## The Little Hills

Mother Rowan accepted the compliment in silence, but it was easy to see that she was pleased: "The worst time of all was when the children had the measles. For of course they had 'em at the same time because when I sent Mary over to a neighbor's to get the complaint I sent William too."

"Sent them to *get* it. What do you mean?"

"Just common sense—that's all," said Mother Rowan. "It was in the neighborhood and they had to have it. The only thing for me to do was to see that they took it in the right manner at the proper season. There's never any knowing when that disorder is done with, if children are allowed to take it at random. Maybe the common run of stepmothers might be careless enough to run such a risk, but I didn't intend to have it on *my* conscience."

Old Mrs. Crabtree settled back in her chair as if she meant to stay a long time.

"There wasn't any use in shilly-shallying either. That's not my way anyhow. When I've got to do a thing I *do* it right off the reel."

"Well, I don't," said Mrs. Crabtree. "I used to—sometimes. But I never do now



## Mrs. Crabtree's Call

'because I've found out more often than not that by putting things off I can slide out of doing them at all.'

Mother Rowan eyed her grimly, thinking such laxity positively immoral.

"Of course I waited till the spring was in sight," she said sternly. "And I didn't take one bluebird's word for it. But when the swallows began to build in the chimney, I knew the right time had come. Then I washed the children's faces, William's first, and put on their clean white aprons — giving Mary the one with a darn — and sent them off hand in hand, telling them to kiss the child that had the complaint, so that they'd be sure to have it."

Old Mrs. Crabtree looked curiously at her for a moment. "You're a remarkable woman," she then said slowly. "You are just about the most remarkable person — man or woman — that I've ever come across. Never till this moment have I ever known anybody with the full courage of conviction. But — what if those children had died!"

"That was Providence's lookout — not mine! It was all I could do to attend to my own duty — let alone anybody else's. And I did attend to



## The Little Hills

it — nobody could have done it better. No children ever had the measles more thoroughly. When they were taken down there was a sift of snow on the ground and when they could lift their heads to look out the window the orchards were in bloom. Why, I can hear their weak little voices now — a-saying how pretty everything was — and almost see their peeked little faces — hardly wider than your two fingers."

There was a long pause after this. It seemed to old Mrs. Crabtree that there was no more to say. But finally she asked — just to keep the ball rolling — where they had lived at that time. She listened rather absently to an account of the buying of the farm on Rennox Creek, which was always covered with a scum of some ill-smelling oil. But she pricked up her ears when she heard that this oil flowing out into Cumberland River had caught fire and burned on the top of the water for fifty-five miles.

"Let's take off five miles just to make an even number," she suggested.

"I'll do nothing of the kind," said Mother Rowan firmly. "That's what I was told. I'll tell the story as I heard it or not at all," and



## Mrs. Crabtree's Call

indeed the encyclopædia tells it in the same way to this very day.

Old Mrs. Crabtree came back to firmer footing. "Well, at all events your stepson was a good boy," she said.

The response was warm: "I never had to slap him but once — and many's the time I've been sorry for that. But if it was to do over again I don't see how it could be different. This was the way of it. We had a real nice neighbor — a maiden lady named Miss Minty Riddle. She was just as good as gold — but mighty sensitive about being so very fleshy. One day she asked me and the children to go with her to the circus. I'd have kept Mary at home, but William was so pleased that I consented and she gave him a quarter of his own to spend. I tried to get him to save it to buy medicine. But nothing would do but he lay it out paying his way into the side-show. And so he did. Well, there we stood waiting — Miss Minty and me and Mary — with folks all around us till William came out of the side-show. He was almost crying and said real loud, with a kind of sob, 'Here I've gone and spent my quarter to see the Fat Lady and she



## The Little Hills

ain't a bit fatter than Miss Minty.' Now what else could I do but fetch him a box on the ear with Miss Minty a-bursting into tears, and all the others a-grinning?"

Nevertheless she was sorely troubled by the recollection of this one severity. And having it thus brought back she could not help speaking of the tombstone to make up for it in some measure. Then, seeing her listener's deep interest, she became as nearly confiding as her nature would allow. She now learned for the first time that the squire owned the field adjoining the graveyard. There was something too in the talk which led her to hope that he might be induced to move the fence. On the whole she began to take a less gloomy view and her strange face was again wearing its rapt look.

That made old Mrs. Crabtree uneasy and she was relieved to see Phœbe coming.



## XII

### LOVE DRAWS WHILE JEALOUSY DRIVES

SHE would have returned even sooner but for trying to see Mrs. Pottle. It seemed a long time since she had consulted that able adviser. Troubles were piling up too — fast and high — and she did not know how to cope with them. It is hard at first to walk alone when we have never been allowed to stand on our own feet, hard enough when the path is clear and Phœbe's was anything but that. Indeed she hardly knew which way to turn and felt that she must ask Mrs. Pottle as she always had done heretofore.

With this in mind she had hurried through her small business at the store and set off for the squire's large white house. But she had gone only a few paces when she caught a glimpse under the trees of Mrs. Pottle's capable back just vanishing beneath Arabella's lilacs.



## The Little Hills

The sight had caused her to pause and waver. For a moment she thought of going on and appealing to her friend as though no one else were present. She knew that Arabella did not gossip. Those who are entirely absorbed in their own affairs rarely do. But she was not thinking about that. The doubt which had suddenly sprung up in her mind was whether it would be right to mention Mother Rowan's peculiarities to any one. In another moment it had seemed clearly wrong to speak of them even to Mrs. Pottle. So that she must try to get along without advice. Then, turning hastily, she sped homeward as if running away from temptation. When she saw the two old ladies sitting on the porch her heart gave a leap of alarm. What might not have happened from her leaving them so long together without a buffer!

She was almost afraid to go nearer but there was no visible sign of collision. Nor was there anything unusual in old Mrs. Crabtree's getting up at once to go home. She always did that the moment she ceased to be amused and now strolled off with a good-natured nod. Mother Rowan too was in a better humor.



## Love Draws while Jealousy Drives

Indeed things seemed not nearly so bad as they had half an hour ago. With new cheerfulness Phœbe said that she was ready to help turn the bed round once more, and make every other change in the arrangement of the furniture that Mother Rowan wanted.

“Just as soon as I can lay off my bonnet,” she called over her shoulder starting along the porch to the shed-room.

“Back *again* !” Mother Rowan challenged.

Phœbe turned to see the new minister standing on the steps.

“My aunt sends me—or I shouldn’t have ventured to come so soon,” he said smiling. “She invites both you ladies to run across and see something that she thinks worth seeing.”

“I’ve got something of my own to see to,” said Mother Rowan shortly. “And I should think Phœbe had traipsed a-plenty for one day—but if she wants to traipse over yonder—it’s no business of mine.”

“Oh, no—” said Phœbe hastily and blushing. “Please thank your aunt. I should like to go—but I couldn’t possibly. We’ve been out the whole morning and the house isn’t yet in order. I can’t leave it to Mother Rowan.”



## The Little Hills

"Well, I don't see why not," said Mother Rowan huffily. "I've kept house before you were born—in as good a one as this—and bigger too. You needn't be in the least afraid—"

"Please—" protested Phœbe. "Indeed I didn't mean that. Of course you are a much better housekeeper than I am. It was only because there is so much to do—and Father Rowan to take care of—"

"Well, you needn't be afraid of *that* either!" exclaimed Mother Rowan with growing indignation. "I have taken care of him—lo, these many years without having you—or anybody else—to tell me *how*."

Phœbe's brown eyes unconsciously appealed to the new minister. She did not know what to say or do and was already beginning to rely upon his greater strength. But even as she looked at him it came to her again that she should allow no one to interfere with her own task. Moved by a tender impulse she held her soft little hand on the hard old arm.

"Only tell me what you want me to do," she said wistfully. "I will do it as nearly as I can—but I don't know what you mean."



## Love Draws while Jealousy Drives

"Just exactly what I say—and always do," responded Mother Rowan. "If you'll understand that once for all—it'll save you—and me too—a good deal of trouble," and with this she stalked through the front door and out of sight.

Phœbe's lips were quivering and her eyes full of tears. But when she turned and saw that the new minister was smiling she smiled also.

"It's best for you to come—for a little while," he urged. "You can return in a few minutes. Please come, it's much the best," going down the steps and opening the gate.

She followed since there seemed nothing else to do. But she was still too much agitated to know just what she was doing and daintily held up her black skirt a little higher than she intended.

His gaze was quite steady and clear. This was the first opportunity that he had found to look at her as closely and as long as he desired. The full light made her brownness fairer and the flush on her smooth cheeks more exquisite. With the sunlight on her uplifted face her brown eyes were the color of sherry wine and as full of sparkles. The brown of her hair too brightened in the sunshine till it turned into



## The Little Hills

red-gold and the moist breeze curled it bewitchingly round the prim brim of her black bonnet. And that absurd veil! Falling nearly to her trim little slippers, it seemed meant to prevent his feeling the thrill that came with every tantalizing glimpse of her snowy petticoat. That enchanting thrill which was lost with the passing of those mysterious white ruffles! For there is never a thrill — not one — in all the prosaic candor of colored silk.

“It’s some discovery in nature study that I’m taking you to see,” he said gayly as he led the way to the parsonage door.

“And you will knowingly lead me into wrongdoing — after all you’ve said,” she spoke laughing yet with real surprise.

“Oh — only wrong for *me* — not for you.”

“How can that be?” She looked up wondering.

“Easily enough. You’ll admit that some things *are* right for a man and wrong for a woman — fighting for example.”

“Yes,” she said readily. Then she blushed vividly, feeling shocked and amazed at herself — as a gentle woman always does when surprised into admitting this opinion which the gentlest woman holds in her secret heart.



## Love Draws while Jealousy Drives

He laughed in open delight: "Well, this is merely the other way round to the same thing. You may safely love Nature while I may not. A sweet woman has plenty of love and sympathy, enough for both Nature and Humanity. She couldn't be narrow and selfish if she tried. But my aunt is calling. Let's go in."

They found Miss Dale busy with a long row of butterflies pinned on the wall. It was a shocking massacre of the innocents and Phœbe could not bear to look at it. But by shutting her eyes to the cruel pins thrust through the frail little bodies, she managed to say something acceptable about the beauty of the lifeless wings. This, however, was not the triumph which she had been summoned to witness. That was upstairs in a small room known as the laboratory, and Miss Dale now led the way up the steep stairs taking a key from her pocket with a look of mystery.

"Of course I keep the door locked," she said gravely. "There are dangerous as well as secret elements of science. I use some arsenic and have to be most cautious," she whispered, throwing open the door.

There was nothing in the room except a



## The Little Hills

large table and a small chair. It was strictly a workshop. Several unpleasant-looking instruments were strewn over the table and in the midst of them lay a most strange and gruesome object. Phœbe stared at it in shrinking amazement without knowing at first what it was. Then she saw that it might once have been some wretched little bird. So it was indeed; the victim of an experiment in taxidermy. And apparently Miss Dale's sole idea of the art was to stuff the poor little feathered skin as full as it could hold, quite regardless of its great elasticity.

"Isn't it a fine specimen of an oriole?" she asked, eager for the praise which she thought her success deserved.

"An oriole!" echoed Phœbe blankly.

Could this distorted ball covered with dingy yellow feathers be all that was left of such a radiant, graceful golden creature — a living sunbeam?

"Well, what do you think of my work?" urged Miss Dale rather impatiently. "Isn't it natural? Taxidermy is really wonderful."

"It must be — most wonderful," replied Phœbe quickly, glad to be able to say that much.



## Love Draws while Jealousy Drives

"But you don't say how you like what I've done. Don't you think it quite true to Nature?"

"It seems to me — that is don't *you* think its feathers stick out a little too stiff and straight and far apart?" Phœbe said confusedly.

"Not at all!" said Miss Dale in quick offence. "It's Nature herself. I've studied birds till I know them and I've mastered the fundamental principles of taxidermy. It may be that my methods are my own. I should hate to think they were not, after all the error I've detected in other naturalists."

"I don't know anything about it," Phœbe said still more timidly. "Only I do know the orioles — I've known them all my life." Thinking of these golden friends, who sang so blithely as they built their beautiful air-castles, she sighed.

"Few people *do* know anything about Nature," retorted Miss Dale sharply. "Study amounts to little. One must see and know for one's self, and distrust everything that anybody else may claim to have seen and known. But — since science does not interest you — we may just as well go back downstairs."



## The Little Hills

After this unlucky visit Phœbe was ignored by the new minister's aunt. None of us find it easy to forgive a doubt of our doing the things that we cannot do: it is far easier to forgive the doubting of the things that we have done. But the new minister managed to see Phœbe without any one's aid. His first pretext was going to help her when he saw her trying to tie up a branch of honeysuckle that she could not reach. Then there was a rose-bush bending with bloom and needing more strength than she had to support it. By the third day he was bold enough to follow her into the garden, having watched from his window till he saw her among the borders. A hedge came between the garden and the big road, shutting out curious eyes. For two days he helped her pick dainty spice pinks and gather humble vegetables with equal delight.

But it was not to be supposed that Mother Rowan would allow this to go on without vigorous protest. She did not suspect what it meant. Falling in love was naturally the last thought to cross her mind. But she resented what she took to be an intrusion and did not hesitate to say just what she felt. In



## Love Draws while Jealousy Drives

the presence of the intruder she told Phœbe that she never could or would stand having a man always round under foot. Furthermore, she declared that if he had nothing to do — and he should have work if he were any manner of account — he would take himself off and give an industrious woman a chance to do hers. How — she demanded — was any housekeeper to do her duty properly with a man hanging round the house — always under foot — and never giving a body a chance to sweep and dust? No, she repeated, she never had put up with it and never would. When *he* used to hang round the fire — a-smoking his pipe — right after breakfast when there was most to do she would not allow it, and made him go down to the store rain or shine, so that she might at least get a free breath.

But the minister merely laughed and grew more circumspect. It was not long before he learned that Mother Rowan was occupied every evening at a certain hour in getting Father Rowan settled for the night. He was also quick to learn that Phœbe then sat alone on the front porch beneath the vines. Learning this he wanted nothing more — except to



## The Little Hills

cross the big road as soon as the kind gloaming floated down. For there was still light enough to see her while the hour was full of twilight's witchery. The scent of the flowers seemed to rise on soft wings and drift through the warm dusk with the silver moth. Beauty, fragrance, and mystery subtly prepared the way for love's lesson. It was not old to him and it was new to her. He had never before learned it thoroughly and she had never learned it at all. But he soon learned it by heart now and saw that she was learning it so too. Yet at the same time he saw that she had made up her mind not to let him know that she knew that he knew. Indeed he understood better than she could have done, just what it was that made her close her eyes to the truth and even to his knowledge of it. These simple scruples which forbade her hearing one word of love — one moment too soon — were very sweet to him. Sometimes he smiled tenderly seeing her smooth down a fold of her mourning, as if needing to remind herself. At such times there was about her something more than ever like a wren: a shy, gentle, brown little house-wren fluttering to reach a



## Love Draws while Jealousy Drives

roof-tree and yet afraid to alight. Feeling this he would have been only too proud to tell everybody how much he loved her. But he could not mention his love just yet without unseemly haste. Then, although he was forbidden to speak of his own love for her he was free to talk about love itself, and after all that is the subtlest way of making love. Moreover, it was a way of making love that she was not on her guard against, and he lost none of the advantage that her inexperience gave him. So that he was able to bide his time and almost content to wait, sitting close beside her hidden behind the flowering vines in the scented dusk lighted only by the fireflies.



## XIII

### SETTING CAPS

IT was only to be expected that the new minister should pay Phœbe more than the usual attention. Everybody always did that. And just because it was Phœbe there could not possibly be a thought that these frequent calls were not mere visits of condolence. Indeed, there and among those people, the faintest shadow of such a suspicion was utterly out of the question in any case of such recent widowhood. For the rest of us living in a wider world of broader tolerance can hardly conceive of the narrow intolerance that binds in a place like this. Nowhere else is there such rigid exaction of convention and such rigorous disregard of inclination. But let us hope that it may not be quite so hard to live without transgressing — where the temptations are fewer than the rules of conduct.



## Setting Caps

How then was it to be known, or thought, or dreamt that Phœbe — the modest — was falling in love and letting herself be fallen in love with, before the last stiffening was out of the crape veil. The merest hint of such a thing would have set the whole community ablaze with indignation in her defence. There was not a woman anywhere near who would not have resented as an affront to herself an imputation of the slightest impropriety upon Phœbe's part. Even old Mrs. Crabtree who laughed at most things, would have frowned down anything like serious criticism of Phœbe. But that keen observer might have seen something of the truth with her own cynical eyes if she had not been absorbed by certain vague and rather hopeless plans just about this time. Seeing the new minister cross the big road so often had set her to thinking.

"What's the reason he doesn't come here more?" she asked suddenly turning to look at her daughter. "You might ask him to supper. And why don't you try to make your hair look better? Rough it up—for goodness' sake—if you can't do anything else. It looks like it was painted on your head."



## The Little Hills

Poor Anne! It is hard to be looked at as she was then. No tie of blood seems to make that look less merciless. Anne endured it in silence as she had done many times before this. But she slipped out of the room as soon as her mother's attention was diverted. She went straight to the garden and over to the tansy bed and knelt down beside it to gather the leaves. A step startled her.

"Aren't they pretty—just like long green ostrich feathers," said the widow Wall close by. "I saw you come out here and I didn't go in the house. Your mother and I somehow never have much to say to one another."

Anne nodded silently. She stammered and seldom spoke if she could help it.

"Well, I'd certainly like to have a nice feather for my dress-bonnet," the widow Wall went on rather plaintively. "Not a green one of course. That wouldn't be my color. I always used to wear blue—and I'm going to begin wearing it again too. Yes, I am. My taste always was real dressy. Mandy Pottle's bonnets never suited my style. They are not the kind I would pick out. But she may have chosen plain things because she never had



## Setting Caps

much of a figure to carry off dressy ones," she said, lifting her lank thinness with sudden pride. "And you're slim too, Anne."

It was a little pitiful to see Anne's glance of gratitude. She rarely received a compliment and would have thanked the widow Wall for this slight one, had she felt able to speak without stammering.

"You are always so neat too — just as neat as a new pin," that amiable soul went on. "That's how I knew it was you when I saw somebody a-talking to Hillery Kibbey on the sly yesterday. Nobody else's gingham ever are as clean and stiff as yours. So that I made sure it was you — though I could only see part of a skirt through the stage wheels. Otherwise — of course — I would never have thought of such a thing as *your* going clear out to the edge of town to speak to him. It seemed just a little underhand, as if you were hiding something."

She looked down sharply and Anne looked up guiltily.

"To be sure you're old enough to keep your own counsel if you want to — and plenty old enough to know what you ought to do and



## The Little Hills

what you oughtn't," she said with a passing touch of mild malice. "But maybe you'll not mind saying what you mean to do with all that tansy. There can hardly be any secret about tansy-tea."

"Not tea — I'm — m-go-go-ing — t't't't' —" stammered Anne taking breath for another running start. "It's to take off my freckles."

"Oh," cried the widow with interest and vivacity. "You mean to put the tansy leaves in buttermilk and set the bowl in the sun. Why, I used to do that a long time ago and I've a great mind to begin again. Suppose you give me a little of yours, Anne. Then if I like it I'll make some of my own."

Anne eagerly intimated that she would be delighted to divide. With her hands full of the leaves she now led the way to the house. But they stopped at the back porch and the widow Wall sat down on the edge of it, while Anne went into the kitchen to get an empty bowl and a pitcher of buttermilk. She set these on the porch floor between them and they laid a row of the aromatic leaves round the inside of the bowl. Then they poured in some of the buttermilk before laying another



## Setting Caps

row of leaves and so on till the bowl was full. Anne took it up and stood looking round rather nervously. It was not easy to find a sunny spot out of the range of her mother's keen and sweeping glance. But she found it at last and coming back to her seat on the edge of the porch, sat down again with a sigh.

"They say it does take off freckles," the widow Wall said encouragingly. "And I wouldn't mind having freckles if my skin was as white and smooth wherever it could be seen as yours is. I don't freckle but I tan—and that's worse. Yes, I'll certainly try that lotion of tansy and buttermilk. For somehow here lately I've just about made up my mind that a woman ain't a bit better Christian for looking any older than she can help. Hereafter I'm a-going to look just as young and nice as I can—"

"Me too," broke in Anne with a desperate effort.

"It's no sin, it's a duty," said the widow Wall with growing conviction. "I've already begun. This whole morning I've been hard at work on my best bombazine. I've turned it upside down and hind part before. With



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my face to you it looks as good as new. Of course I don't intend to wear it every day, but I can slip it on when I see anybody a-coming. A body wants to look well dressed if a gentleman should happen to stop at the gate for a chat. From my front window I can see as far up the big road as the parsonage gate. So that there'll be plenty of time to slip on the bombazine and I needn't wear it constantly. But there's one thing that I do intend to wear straight along and get the good out of—that's my nicest breastpin—*you've* seen it, Anne."

"Once or twice at church," Anne managed to say politely and with genuine interest.

The widow Wall nodded: "Yes, the one with the lock of my father's hair. Sometimes I've wished that I'd had one of my husband's to put with it. His was so red and father's so black that they would have looked mighty nice and odd together. I thought about it while he was alive but I never had the heart to ask him for it—he had so little to spare," sighing deeply. "All that he had was one long lock. It was on the right side but he used to spread it over the whole top of his



## Setting Caps

head just one hair deep. My—but it was interesting to see him do it! I never got tired of watching him when he did it. Well, well,” she sighed. “But of course *you* can’t be expected to know how a widow feels. And as I was a-saying just now—there’s no sense in letting yourself go—and I don’t intend to. I got out that breastpin and my best worked collar and they are lying on my bed right this minute—with the pin stuck in the collar. You have to be careful with a fine worked collar, but I can keep it there handy and all ready to pin on—whenever I see anybody a-coming down the big road. My! to think how young I was when my mother let me wear that collar and pin to church for the first time. I can hear her now a-whispering when I nodded: ‘sit up, Jane, and show your breastpin.’ *She* didn’t think as some people do that the worse you look the better for your soul. And I’m going to be really dressy from this time on—no matter what Mandy Pottle says! And I mean to put some gay flowers on that last ugly dress-bonnet that she gave me. I’ve never had what I like—and I mean to have it now.”

The tone was a torch to the rebellion already



## The Little Hills

seething in Anne's flat bosom. She burst out with the peculiar recklessness that only the timid ever show. She now began telling without the slightest reserve, a secret which she had not intended to tell but a moment before. So excited that she almost forgot to stammer, she confessed her purpose in waylaying Hillery Kibbey. "For I felt just the same way that you do," she said. "I'd never had what I wanted and I couldn't stand it any longer. I determined that I would do exactly as I pleased—for once—no matter *what* came of it! That's the reason I didn't even let anybody know when I sent by Hillery—much less what I sent for. It was my own money—I had a right to spend it."

"Sakes alive!" cried the widow Wall. "What in the world *did* you send for—"

But Anne did not wait to be questioned. She had burned her bridges and had no thought of turning back. "Why, I gave Hillery plenty of money to buy me a real, thick, curly false front—and of the very blackest hair that he could find."

"Goodness! Gracious!" The widow Wall could only stare at the thin and sandy locks



## Setting Caps

that clung so close to the wan and freckled face.

"Why shouldn't I?" demanded Anne fully aroused, defiant, resenting the look and stammering wildly. "You surely don't suppose that I'm going to get this same kind of hair—that I've always had to put up with—when I can choose to suit myself! For if you do—you're very much mistaken, that's all. My new false front is going to be thick and curly and black as a crow. I'm tired of never having anything that I like. For once I mean to have what suits me. Yes I do! And I don't care one mite what you or anybody may say. Not even Mother! There now!"

She stopped out of breath and in a sudden panic at her own daring. Then she began to cry in a weak, frightened way and to cast alarmed glances over her shoulder.

"She couldn't hear you," soothed the widow Wall. "There, there! Don't cry. It does me good to hear you talk like that and see you show some spunk at last. If you'd only stand up for yourself she'd treat you better. The more we put up with the more we have to take. That's human nature. And you're just



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right. Do as you like. I'll back you up all I can. But speaking about looks, have you seen Arabella since she took to using plumpers?"

"Plum'm'm'm'm — pers?" wondered poor Anne with curiosity and interest dawning in her pale and reddened eyes.

"Well, I've had my suspicions lately," said the widow Wall moving nearer and lowering her tone. "Now that there are gentlemen in the neighborhood of course you notice a good many things that you never did before. But I couldn't tell what it was that made Arabella's face look just as plump and round as a baby's. There she sat smiling and always turning her head, or putting up her handkerchief when she spoke to the passer-by. Yesterday though — just after I'd seen you talking to Hillery — I made up my mind to go right over to Arabella's and see for myself what she had in her mouth. And I did — just coolly sat myself down without being invited — and there I stayed too till she had to own up."

Anne asked what it was, most eagerly and with great difficulty.

"Little thin, round pieces of raw white turnip. More than that she had a whole



## Setting Caps

tumbler full of them in water, hidden behind the window curtain. For she said in that airy way of hers, that no one of real refinement would wish to use the same piece twice. Of course I turned up my nose. You have to, or there's no standing Arabella's airs and graces. But — just between you and me, Anne — the plumpers did make a great difference. I would hardly have known Arabella's hatchet face if I had seen it anywhere else but there at the same window — watching and waiting — for the captain to come."

"It always seems very pitiful to me," said Anne gently.

"Well, I'd feel sorry for her too — if she didn't put on so many airs and wasn't so wrapped up in herself and the captain. Now, you know just as well as I do that she never would have said one blessed word about the plumpers. And she with a husband already too and knowing perfectly well that spinsters and widows are naturally more interested in everything that makes a lady attractive — especially when there's a strange gentleman in the neighborhood and a bachelor — than any married woman has a right to be."



## The Little Hills

Anne managed to make it clear that she would like very much to find some means of filling out her own hollow cheeks, and the widow Wall offered to fetch her a nice white turnip. But the confidential talk was now rudely interrupted by old Mrs. Crabtree's calling to ask what they were talking about anyway, demanding to know what they were doing so long, and imperiously ordering them to come in at once and amuse her—if they could. But the widow Wall—wise through experience—made her escape by declaring that she must go straight down to the squire's house and see what had become of Mandy Pottle.



## XIV

### ARABELLA'S INSPIRATION

FOR the squire's lady had learned, as we all learn sooner or later, that time does not help us undo our mistakes. She had hardly spoken the hasty words before she was sorry. The first day after the estrangement seemed very long, and the second dragged as if it would never end. Through the third she felt sure that Phœbe would come — forgetting there had been any trouble — in the sweet old way. But she had no means of knowing that only an accident had prevented her coming. And so when nearly a week had crept by she grew gravely uneasy, wondering how she was ever to make friends without a fatal loss of dignity.

Yet nothing had been lost for lack of effort on her part. To use a country phrase she had not allowed grass to grow under her feet. She had gone every morning and almost every



## The Little Hills

evening to consult Arabella. It seemed safer to hold these consultations in Arabella's house rather than in her own, where there were always so many servants standing at elbow, ready to listen and gossip. For it was necessary that everything about this unfortunate matter should be kept perfectly quiet, out of regard for her own high position which must not even seem to be in danger. Then the squire — seeing Arabella coming and going so often — would have been certain to make some of those ironical comments which were always a great trial. And she could not endure to be laughed at and bantered now. Her perplexity was too great and her distress too real. Indeed it was nothing less than a tragedy, to find herself unexpectedly and wholly outside the social life of the community after being so long its sole dictator. It was bitter to see groups of people passing up and down the big road and crossing from one side to the other, and not have a word to say about their movements, or even know where they were going or what they were saying or doing. And none of us may belittle what she felt. For after all it is our own estimate that gives everything its value so far as we are



## Arabella's Inspiration

concerned. Others may have smiled at the little things that we have set our own hearts upon. And to this simple, honest, earnest, unselfish woman the social supremacy over that remote little corner of the green earth, was the most important and highly desirable thing in the whole world.

Then too she had held it for years without question from any one. It had ever been a source of great pride but it had never seemed quite so precious a privilege as it did now when in danger—if not already lost. Most of us can understand and sympathize with this feeling out of our deepest experience. And we also know that the fact that she had lost it through her own fault did not make the loss less hard to bear. That bitter knowledge has never lessened the hardness of anything that any of us have had to endure.

At all events it only made poor Mrs. Pottle more miserable and took away the last of the self-confidence which had carried her through many trials. Of a sudden she doubted her right to lay down the social law, even to Phœbe whom everybody dictated to out of pure tenderness. Then in remembering the sweetness



## The Little Hills

with which Phœbe had always submitted, her heart began to ache even more keenly than her pride. For she loved her—indeed she had never realized how dearly—till this vague coolness had risen between them like a chilling fog. Why, she actually did not know how to sit down to her sewing without knowing what Phœbe was doing and meant to do the whole day through. Restlessly she wandered about her own house—scolding the maids and dissatisfied with everything—until she suddenly determined that something must be done and at once.

Her first impulse was to go straight to Phœbe in the direct, simple manner natural to her and own—bluntly—that she was to blame. With a throb of affection she thought how Phœbe would come flying to meet the first tender word with open arms. She could hardly wait to put on her leghorn bonnet and she intended to stop at Arabella's, only long enough to say that nobody could persuade her to put off going one moment longer. For there was a slight but growing suspicion in her mind that Arabella's advice might not be entirely disinterested. Accordingly she eyed her



## Arabella's Inspiration

sharply when she stopped at the gate to announce what she meant to do. There was even a hint of defiance in her tone.

Arabella was taken quite by surprise and much upset. This step was not at all in accord with her own plans. She had enjoyed the importance which these frequent consultations gave her. The jealousy of the widow Wall and the envy of the other neighbors had not lessened her satisfaction. None of us value our honors any the less for seeing that others would like to have them. And then Mrs. Pottle's frequent visits were not merely empty honors, for she had never once gone to consult Arabella without taking her something good to eat, or something nice to wear which she liked still better. Naturally then Arabella was in no haste to alter the situation, though her sympathy was just as sincere as it could reasonably have been expected to be. But she was human and her first feeling now was blank dismay. Yet she did not dare let this appear or say a word in opposition, knowing that her friend was not easy to turn once she had decided upon a course. And so—being at a loss what else to do—Arabella instinctively



## The Little Hills

took one of the sudden rhetorical flights that in other emergencies had wafted her beyond the reach of her friend's steady-going common sense.

"Mandy! *Mandy!* My dear friend," she implored almost in tears and with the greatest agitation. "What in the world are you thinking of! Can it be possible that you mean to commit social suicide — that you really desire to lay down the social sceptre and abdicate at once and forever?"

Mrs. Pottle looked at her — just as she expected — much as a plodding turtle might look at a gyrating bird. This bewildered expression told Arabella that she had flitted far enough. It also gave her courage to go on with perfect confidence, for she never bamboozled anybody quite so completely as she always did herself. She spoke in the most beautiful way of Phœbe, saying that there could be no doubt of her warm-hearted response to the first offer of forgiveness. It would indeed be a simple matter and one very easy to settle if Phœbe alone had to be considered. But — unfortunately — there were others, Arabella said shaking her head — the



## Arabella's Inspiration

widow Wall for example and worst of all—there was old Mrs. Crabtree. At the mention of this dreaded name Mrs. Pottle's face changed as much as Arabella anticipated. Its expression of determination was not nearly so set as it had been a moment before. And in truth the little shiver that Arabella herself gave was genuine enough. When it had had its full effect she went on:

“For you, with all your intelligence and knowledge of human nature, must know what the result will be, if you insist upon taking so rash a step. But maybe you haven't taken quite time enough to think. Or possibly you are too broad-minded and large-souled to see really little things. That makes it all the more my duty—in affection and gratitude—to watch them for you. I'm bound to warn you of your danger. Take a little more time to see just how great it is. If you should make a public confession of being in the wrong what could you ever expect to do with Jane Wall? Remember how she broke out that night at Phœbe's. In my opinion her behavior caused most of this trouble that you are in now.”



## The Little Hills

“ Well, then what *am* I to do? ” demanded Mrs. Pottle crossly, all the natural shrewdness coming back to her gaze.

Seeing it Arabella flew off again high above her friend's practical head: “ That is not for me to say, my dear Mandy. I dare only point to the deep pit yawning at your unwary feet and implore you to look well before you leap. It is my humble duty to cling to your skirts and hold you back as long as my strength lasts. I can never stand still and see my lifelong benefactor commit social suicide — ”

“ What under the shining sun *are* you driving at! ” cried Mrs. Pottle, a good deal frightened and angry because she was. “ I never know a bit more than the man in the moon what you mean when you go on like that. And you do it every chance you get.”

Then Arabella saw that she had flown a little too far, and began crying without the slightest effort.

“ Yes, you do, ” persisted Mrs. Pottle hardily. “ Every time I try to pin you down — you fly off like that. Now do for once say what you mean, real plain and sensible. Then we can tell what we are about, ” she said in a softer tone.



## Arabella's Inspiration

"Now — don't go on like that either. You know perfectly well that I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

"Yes," sighed Arabella in gentle reproach. "Nobody ever had a better heart than you've got, Mandy — but you've got a mighty sharp way too sometimes. And I do think you might remember that I mustn't be upset like this, so that I can't help crying and spoiling my looks — when the captain may come in the stage this very hour. Just wait a moment till I bathe my eyes and put on a little powder — so that I won't look like a fright — if he should."

There was no heart hard enough to resist that. Mrs. Pottle's melted at once for hers was not at all hard. She apologized and soon after went home as meek as a lamb, relying implicitly upon her friend's ability to "affect a reconciliation without humiliation," which was Arabella's lofty promise as they parted at the gate. On the next morning Mrs. Pottle's faith was so strong that she had to take two black boys along to carry her grateful offerings to faithful friendship. The baskets were carefully covered from curious eyes, especially the widow



## The Little Hills

Wall's. But jealousy does not need to see and that watching lady waylaid the squire's wife one afternoon and asked rather cruelly if she had noticed all that was going on up at Phoebe's house since the strangers had come. Mrs. Pottle scorned to make any retort, but she burst in on Arabella declaring that she would not wait another day, vehemently vowing that if Arabella did not do something to make up the quarrel that very day, she would take the matter in her own hands. She repeated that this was what she should have done in the first place as she had wished to do. She owned that Phoebe was like her own daughter, declaring it was nothing but foolishness to let an outsider come between them and persuade her to dilly-dally — with everything getting worse every minute.

The suddenness of the attack overwhelmed Arabella so that she could not gather her wits immediately. But it was not long before she saw that the end of her tether was reached and as soon as she could think she brought out her plan. It was really an inspiration and Mrs. Pottle instantly recognized it as such. Indeed there was nothing singular in its being both



## Arabella's Inspiration

brilliant and practical, since — poor thing — her whole life had been spent in devising ways and means to make people do what they had no intention of doing. The scheme was to give a tea-party, at her own house as that was neutral ground, and invite everybody. Thus brought together on a purely social occasion there would be no need of apologies from anybody, and after meeting in this friendly manner, there could be no more coolness, the whole difficulty thus being silently and politely done with forever.

“Well, I declare — you do beat all, Arabella — when you’ve a mind to,” declared Mrs. Pottle positively radiant with delight. “Now, why couldn’t I have thought of that? And I wonder why you didn’t think of it before. But better late than never. And it certainly is a nice plan. Of course you’ll let me send some of the things for the tea — since it is really given for me.”

“Anything that you like — dearest Mandy. My sole aim is to please and serve you. And just for your own sake — if you don’t mind — it really seems advisable after all to invite old Mrs. Crabtree with the rest.”



## The Little Hills

The squire's lady sat up straight and bristling, but she did not have time to say anything.

"For if we don't invite her she will spoil the tea-party—just as sure as we live. I don't know *how* she'd do it. Nobody ever can tell what she'll do, but spoil it she will, unless we have her here where we can watch and smooth things over."

After some further argument Mrs. Pottle agreed that the enemy might be invited, deciding that her own feelings should not stand in the way of general harmony. Moreover she wrote the name at the very head of the list when Arabella brought out a pencil and piece of paper. The list of guests was not long enough to make it likely that any one would be left out, but the writing of the names pleased Arabella and impressed Mrs. Pottle.

"There! We've got the new minister's name of course and even got down Father Rowan's though we have only seen him—poor old gentleman—through the window. But they say he is getting better and can walk now by holding on to something. Yet—don't you really think, Mandy, that the tea-party would be a little more exclusive, and the reconcilia-



## Arabella's Inspiration

tion rather more complete, if there were no gentlemen at all?" said Arabella.

It had suddenly occurred to her that it might be a bit awkward to smooth things over, and maybe try to hold old Mrs. Crabtree in order, under the squire's quizzical gaze. She remembered how often it had made her feel as if she were a very small piece of very thin glass. Yet she could not help hesitating. It must be either all or none of the gentlemen and she would have liked to invite the new minister.

"For after all there is a certain stimulus in the company of gentlemen. It somehow helps you to look your prettiest and be your brightest," she said rather absently and somewhat rashly.

"Do you mean Samuel Pottle? For if you do I can just tell you that—" Mrs. Pottle began.

"I meant the captain," said Arabella with unusual spirit, a toss of her head telling her opinion of all other men. "Sometimes I hardly know what to make of you, Mandy. To think of your saying a thing like that to me—*me* married to the captain! Well, when he comes—and maybe he'll be here before that sun goes



## The Little Hills

down — I can tell him that I have had a chance while he was gone to find out my real, true friends.”

Under the critical circumstances Mrs. Pottle could not afford to quarrel. She agreed rather hastily that the gentlemen should not be invited. Then to tell the whole truth she, herself, was not particularly eager to have the squire in a position to observe what transpired. The one thing that she really desired was to have Phœbe there close to her side. And she said as much so promptly and plainly that this little tiff blew over. Then they both bent every energy to arranging the tea-party. The next thing to be decided was where the lady guests were to sit round the table. For a tea-party down in that country of leisurely good-living was a very different matter from the hasty, meagre function which goes by the same name elsewhere nowadays. Everybody sat down to enjoy an ample meal of rich viands, and it was some little time before Arabella could assign places to the guests in the strict order of their importance, and yet avoid bringing certain ladies too close together.

“You might put Phœbe’s stepmother-in-



## Arabella's Inspiration

law at your end of the table, suggested Mrs. Pottle. "Jane Wall will fit in anywhere. Of course Phœbe will sit by me."

Arabella cried out in dismay: "That won't do at all! Why, there's old Mrs. Crabtree on my right hand—I'd never dare put her anywhere else. And you've heard about her going up to Phœbe's already and badgering the stranger. Howsoever—I understand it was nip and tuck—for the newcomer's a tar-tar too. And now that I come to think of it, maybe with me between them, they couldn't get at each other and I could watch them both."

Then ensued a lengthy and interesting discussion as to all that Arabella would need for the supper, and what the squire's lady might have the privilege of contributing. This of course would be a great deal since it was really a large social enterprise that Arabella had so gravely undertaken. To make sure that nothing might be forgotten or overlooked, she wrote down everything that she now could think of on large sheets of paper. This first list was a long one yet before the great occasion was over it was nearly as long again. For Arabella



## The Little Hills

could not sleep at all on the following night, because her head fairly whirled with charming ideas as she continually thought of something more still nicer and prettier. However the first list did to start with and Mrs. Pottle hid it in her capacious pocket without a word or thought of protest. She merely urged that the invitation — especially Phœbe's — should be given at once. Accordingly Arabella put on her bonnet in such haste and agitation that its gauzy pink ribbons fluttered as she tied the dainty strings under her quivering chin. She promised faithfully that she would go to invite Phœbe the first one, and just as soon as she had been to the post-office to get the letter that she felt sure the captain must have written, in the event of his being delayed.

“Is my bonnet on straight, Mandy?” she asked anxiously as they paused outside the gate for a last word before going their different ways. “I wouldn't like to look untidy because I'm hurried, if he should come to-day in the stage. It seems as if I heard it rumbling down the hill at this very minute,” she said in sudden happy excitement. “Sometimes I wish there weren't so many trees and



## Arabella's Inspiration

the leaves were not so thick. I can't see who is in the stage till it comes real near. Well, I must hurry — in case he is coming."

And so with a gay, smiling nod she tripped airily off on her high heels with her frivolous ribbons fluttering.



## XV

### GREAT EXPECTATIONS

THE stage was very late that day and did not bring the letter after all. But Hillery Kibbey, just turning his horses to drive away from the post-office, called out to tell Arabella that he felt almost certain the letter would come in the next mail. She nodded in cheerful confidence being quite sure of it. Then, bowing and smiling, she made her graceful way through the little crowd which stood back — hat in hand as it always did — and gayly set off to give the invitations to the tea-party.

Drawing near Phœbe's gate she saw the new minister pass through it on his way across the big road. It was close to the time when Mother Rowan usually came out after getting Father Rowan settled for the night. But Arabella knew nothing of the newcomer's habits and went on without warning, and Mother Rowan



## Great Expectations

did appear in the front door just as she fluttered up the porch steps. For a cool breeze began to blow now as evening came on, setting all her pink ribbons in lively motion. Shadows were already gathering under the vines too yet there was light enough for her to see the strange, small face looking down upon her in scornful hostility and to notice the tall gaunt figure instantly squaring itself. But she merely wondered mildly without the least idea what the look and motion meant. Discourtesy of any kind was foreign to her own nature, and there was no harshness or bitterness in her heart toward any living creature. Accordingly she now went straight up to Mother Rowan — in a little whirlwind of rosy streamers — and held out her thin hand which looked pathetically like a bird's foot.

“It is a pleasure to see a relation of Phœbe's,” she said in her finest, most polished manner. “A very great pleasure.”

Mother Rowan stood like a grim image carven in rough stone.

“Do take a seat,” said Phœbe in nervous haste, placing a chair. “And you too — please, Mother Rowan.”



## The Little Hills

Arabella took the seat saying that it was hardly worth while as she had but a moment to stay. Mother Rowan then dropped into the other chair, as if she did not wish to take any unfair advantage by standing up.

“For I’ve come only on a pleasing errand,” said Arabella in her ingratiating tone. “And I must be getting home before dark. I’ve come to invite you both to a tea-party on to-morrow evening at four o’clock,” she said looking brightly from the grim face to the uneasy one.

“How kind—and nice,” Phœbe cried warmly.

A sudden impulse moved Arabella and she turned with a smile to beam at Mother Rowan. “A very simple little entertainment but—if you’ll allow me to say so, Madam—it is given especially in honor of your arrival,” she said.

“What for?” demanded Mother Rowan—grimly—and naturally enough—since she had never in the whole course of her hard life had anything for nothing and did not expect or wish to have.

“Oh!” gasped Arabella who was also having an entirely new experience. She was so disconcerted that she could not think for a



## Great Expectations

moment. But she managed to gather her wits. "For Phœbe's sake. We are all happy to do anything we can for her. Then it is our custom to show some attention to visitors —"

"So I'm a *visitor*, hey? And *him* too, I suppose!" cried Mother Rowan. "Well it was *my* understanding—and his—that we had come to live here and make this our home."

"Why — of course — of course —" declared Phœbe in alarmed haste. "Mrs. Lightfoot didn't mean that you hadn't. She never thought—"

"Seems to me that no outsider's got any cause to meddle one way or another," retorted Mother Rowan relentlessly. "Whether we're a-visiting or a-living here in this little old house—is nobody's business but mine and yours and his."

In helpless confusion Phœbe mechanically asked Arabella to have a drink of cool water. But the offer was declined almost as hastily as it was made. Arabella still had not the remotest idea why this strange woman was acting so, or what made her eyes snap in that alarming manner, but she did not intend to be left alone with her. Only the promise to Mrs.



## The Little Hills

Pottle kept her from running away at once without saying anything more about the tea-party. And she left just as soon as she had fairly pressed the invitation, and Phœbe had said that they would be delighted to come to the tea-party, glancing meantime rather apprehensively at Mother Rowan.

Dusk was falling by this time and Arabella ran down to the widow Wall's at a rapid pace. She wanted to get there before dark and see whether the blush-roses were yet in full bloom. Those blooming in the widow's little garden were the prettiest and sweetest in the whole country. And Arabella said as much—having set her heart on having a big bowl full of the roses in the center of the tea-table—when the widow Wall met her at the gate. There was a slight chill in that mild lady's greeting but it began to thaw with Arabella's first flattering word. In another moment she was as wax in the flatterer's hands, as many less guileless people became when Arabella exerted herself. For the craft that we live by necessarily becomes more or less of an art. Then the mere mention of the tea-party went to the widow Wall's head as sparkling wine goes



## Great Expectations

to a weak one wholly unused to strong drink. It was not often that anything so intoxicating came her joyless way. She not only offered to give every blush-rose that she had and every bud showing a tinge of pink, but all the rest of her flowers and to loan everything else that she possessed. She was not hurt on learning that she was not the first to be invited. That fact came out through a slight slip of Arabella's supple tongue. But the widow Wall had long ago learned, that those who have little to give must take what is given when they can get it.

And Arabella was most cordial: "You must come early and stay till the last. But I can't stay another minute. It's almost dark now and I've got to run clear back to the parsonage and invite the new minister's aunt. Of course I wasn't going to invite her before I did you, Jane—you may be perfectly certain of that—yet a certain amount of respect is due our pastor's relations no matter how odd they may be. But I must say that the new minister has not given us much encouragement to be friendly."

"He's done better lately," said the widow



## The Little Hills

Wall. "He's certainly doing his duty by Phœbe. And—" with a quick change of tone, "maybe he won't think it right to let you come home by yourself—being as it's so near dark. And I honestly believe there wouldn't be a mite of harm in his walking home with you—so long as he knows all about the captain. If he *should*, don't fail to stop here. Then you can have a big bunch of the blush-roses to take home. But without a gentleman—I wouldn't dare gather them this late for fear of those little garden snakes that always begin to creep as the cool of the evening comes on." She could hardly wait to be alone before hurrying indoors to put on her nicest worked collar with her best breast-pin. And it was not till she saw Arabella's candle shining far down the big road, that this finery was laid aside with a sigh.

The next morning found the whole feminine community up before the sun and in a twitter of delightful excitement. The widow Wall only waited to see Arabella's front door propped open to take over a great basket of the blush-roses. She also offered to stay and help with everything there was to do. But



## Great Expectations

Arabella declined the offer with tact that left no wound. She did not think a great deal of the widow Wall's taste. Then it was not by any means advisable that she—or anybody—should be there the whole time seeing everything that Mandy Pottle sent. She would be sure to notice whether it was all used for the tea-party—maybe whether it was really needed when asked for—and most likely say something about it too. So that the widow Wall was most tactfully sent away, clear up to the parsonage to ask Miss Dale for some asparagus plumes. There was plenty of this exquisite green mist afloat in the gardens nearer by. But Arabella could not think of a more polite way of getting rid of the widow Wall. Nor could she think of anything else to ask Miss Dale for, and everybody must be asked for something, or else feel hurt by being left out. Then there was Phœbe. It was not easy for Arabella to know what to ask from her, who had so little to divide among so many. But she suddenly remembered hearing Phœbe's hens cackle and on a happy thought called after the widow Wall, asking her to ask Phœbe for three or four eggs—very fresh ones—to make



## The Little Hills

the foam snow-white on the top of the floating-island.

Now it happened that Phœbe had put the very last eggs she had — and the freshest — under a sitting hen barely an hour before. She was more than willing to take them out again regardless of the hen's protest, but they had been sat upon long enough to get thoroughly warm. That unluckily made the sending of them rather a delicate question of conscience. Phœbe did not know just what was right to do. She dared not tell the widow Wall exactly how the matter stood, knowing her utter inability to keep anything to herself. And so, leaving her on the porch, she ran indoors and asked Mother Rowan what *she* thought. But that lady merely said shortly that beggars should not be choosers, which did not help Phœbe at all. Finally, however, she compromised by pulling the protesting hen off the nest, and putting the eggs in cold water for a while, before sending them with a scrupulous message that they were the freshest she had, but not quite as fresh as she would have liked them to be.

Meantime Arabella herself had gone all the



## Great Expectations

way down to old Mrs. Crabtree's to borrow her solid silver forks — though she would have preferred, much as she liked elegance, to use some plated ones belonging to another neighbor whom she was not afraid of — just to show that there was no hard feeling anywhere. This tea-party was to be wholly and solely for harmony and she did not shirk anything however difficult. And even old Mrs. Crabtree was unusually amiable, and kind and thoughtful enough to offer a long table-cloth. But one had already been borrowed together with two smaller ones for the side tables, from a lady living at the other end of the big road. Nobody would have thought of borrowing them from her, since she was rather outside the exclusive circle. But she did not intend to stay there and so offered to lend the table-cloths as an entering wedge. For after all human nature was much the same even in this remote corner of the world.

But the great centre of all the delightful excitement was the squire's large white house. There it had broken out while he was eating his breakfast alone. Mrs. Pottle had other things to do than waiting on him that morning.



## The Little Hills

She did not turn her head when he hoped aloud that the fair Arabella could get along and manage the tea-party without his pipe or armchair. He admitted that she would have to have them if she wanted them. He owned quite frankly that he had never made a personal claim to anything in his own house, except the one big nail that he hung his hat on behind the dining-room door. He solemnly promised — rising from the table — that being left in peaceable possession of the rusty nail, he had nothing to say though the house should be stripped from garret to cellar. And so, taking down his hat, he drove off while his wife — disdaining any reply — went ahead doing exactly as she pleased as she always did. Nor did she hesitate to call two men from their work in the fields — with wagon and team — to haul a barrel of soft water from her cistern over to Arabella, though she did not think that the tea and coffee would be any better than if made with the hard water from Arabella's well. Arabella did not think so either, but she had wanted some soft water for her complexion, and this seemed as good a chance to get it as she was likely to have. The truth



## Great Expectations

was that she made the most of the great opportunity in every respect. Mrs. Pottle knew this perfectly well and considered it fair enough, in view of all that Arabella's giving the entertainment was to do for herself. She appreciated the service so much that she took extra pains to spare Arabella's feelings by covering almost everything that she sent. But of course she could not help the neighbors smelling the large rich cakes which went by still fragrantly hot from the oven. Yet the whole air was filled with appetizing odors and nobody could tell exactly which kitchen they came from. Then there was always more or less mystery about what went on in Arabella's. But the greatest stir followed Mrs. Pottle's handsomest cut-glass bowl because it was so full of floating-island — heaped up like drifted snow — that it could not be covered and flashed far through the dazzling sunshine. The cut-glass cups too had to be set out safely apart and borne very cautiously on a big silver waiter. Altogether the preparations could hardly have been upon a more splendid scale — and it was many and many a day before that famous tea-party was to be forgotten.



## XVI

### THE UNEXPECTED THAT ALWAYS HAPPENS

ON the first stroke of four o'clock all the front gates opened under the great trees along the big road, and the ladies set out for the tea-party dressed in their best, and trying to walk as slowly as though nothing unusual were going on.

It was a soft gray day. A tender haze floated down from the gentle hills enfolding this quiet corner of the green earth. A moist breeze blew over the flowering gardens and across the blooming clover fields, but it was barely a scented sigh. Even the larks in the meadows were silent for once. The fragrant stillness was so complete that the faint cooing of a dove came from the cool shadows of the far-off woods.

But the opening of the gates changed all this. A startled pair of red wings flew up and down



## The Unexpected that Always Happens

again, alighting on the widow Wall's garden fence where they began whirling, dancing and singing as excitedly as if they too had been invited to the tea-party. But they flitted away when she waved her hand at them. She wanted to hear as well as see everything that was to be heard or seen. It had been hard enough to wait for the striking of the hour. Indeed she had run into the garden more than once to take a look at those fragile flowers — the four-o'clocks — which open their blue eyes when the morning-glories cease blowing their silent trumpets. But it seemed as if they never would awaken on that memorable afternoon. She had been dressed even to the careful putting on of her darned lace mitts for at least two hours. Then she was tired of standing behind the window curtain and watching the big road. Yet she could not possibly sit down and be still — wrought up to such a pitch — and it was really necessary to keep a constant lookout in order to know when Mrs. Pottle went by to the tea-party. For of course none of the other ladies could think of going till she had gone. So that the widow Wall could only watch and fidget wondering what could make her so late.



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She had some slight inkling of the truth, which was that certain critical preparations for the feast must be left to the latest moment in order to be quite perfect. And, sure enough, when Mrs. Pottle did go by at last she bore a covered dish—too delicate to be intrusted to any one else—in her own steady and capable hands.

The widow Wall was almost upon her heels following as close behind as she might venture, longing to know what was in that dish. Yet she could not help stopping to look up the big road to see who else was coming. Most of the guests were already in sight though not near enough for her to recognize their features. But she knew that the little figure in black almost lost under the long veil was Phoebe. And the tall one with her—walking like a soldier marching into battle—must be her stepmother-in-law. There could not be much doubt about the identity of the third lady either. Only the new minister's eccentric aunt would be darting about in that wild manner and stopping now and then to look at some ridiculous bug or troublesome weed. Nobody with her wits about her would be keeping sensible people from coming on to



## The Unexpected that Always Happens

the tea-party, as she was doing. There were other ladies beyond this group — the owner of the table-cloths for one — but they were of no special interest to the widow Wall. Turning she now looked down the big road and saw old Mrs. Crabtree and Anne. On a first impulse she walked faster. Few loitered to meet that old lady. But after a hasty pace or two the widow Wall cast another glance. The mother and daughter were so seldom seen away from home or anywhere together, that the very fact was enough to draw a curious gaze. Then the widow Wall's curiosity was great and just as she glanced round again there came a dazzling burst of sunshine out of the veiled blue. In it she noticed that the old lady was wearing her famous brocade, a faded remnant of former splendor. It was not often that the neighbors got a glimpse of it. She was too lazy to put it on or even get it out and let them look at it. There was a tradition that tarnished threads of real gold and silver were interwoven with its dim garlands of silken flowers. But Mrs. Pottle had always hooted at the idea, and remembering that, it now struck the widow Wall that this was a good chance to see for



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herself, and perhaps be able hereafter "to face Mandy down." There would not be much of an opportunity to examine the silk after reaching Arabella's on account of the crowd and the house being so small. Accordingly she stood still in the middle of the big road waiting for them to draw nearer. It seemed as if the stiff brocade — standing out like an old-fashioned parasol — really did glitter in the sun as though it were true about the gold and silver. She could see quite distinctly. Then she chanced to turn her attention from the mother to the daughter, and — as she declared afterward in telling Phœbe about it — she "nearly fell down right in her own tracks." She did not know at first what was the matter with Anne, what in the world made her look so strange. But in another moment she knew. The false front had come! Hillery Kibbey had executed his commission faithfully as he always did. No hair could possibly have been thicker or blacker or more bushy than that which now surrounded poor Anne's wasted, wan, pinched and freckled face. The effect was so extraordinary that the widow Wall could only stare with dropped jaw. She wondered what the old lady thought, whether



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her sharp eyes were growing dull, or whether they had not looked at her daughter at all which appeared most likely. Then looking again at Anne she saw such a pitiful appeal in the pale little eyes that her own kind heart was touched. She looked away just as soon as she could, and moving closer to Anne's side drew her thin arm within hers which was not much more round or strong. And so they went on at a safe distance ahead of the old lady, clear to Arabella's. In telling Phœbe about it the widow Wall said that she was so sorry for poor Anne that she was not ashamed to go in with her.

All the guests gathered very promptly and Phœbe was among the first. She was exquisitely rosy from the walk and excitement. Her pretty arms and neck looked modestly lovely through the thin muslin of her simple black dress. Her brown eyes were almost as bright as soft and her brown hair curled and curled all over her little head, as if fairly rollicking in its brief escape from the gloom of that long veil. As soon as she had greeted the hostess she went straight up to Mrs. Pottle in the sweet old way and said how long it seemed since she had seen her, that she could not tell



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how it had happened but was determined that it should never happen again. Then Mrs. Pottle suddenly turned round and shook hands with Mother Rowan so cordially that that lady was instantly suspicious and resented her condescension. She would have said what she thought too, but there was no time. Arabella saw what was coming and hastily threw herself into the breach. With perfect social tact she managed to set everybody chatting at once in the liveliest, pleasantest manner in the world. There was only one other alarm. This was when Mother Rowan abruptly sat down next old Mrs. Crabtree, and that old lady threw back her handsome head and looked under her spectacles, as she always did when she meant mischief. But this danger also was averted by Arabella's instantly inviting the company in to supper a little earlier than had been arranged. In fact those in front saw Mrs. Pottle's servants scurrying out the back door. The awkward mischance might have upset almost anybody but Arabella, and indeed it was particularly embarrassing to her because of a vaguely grand way she had of referring to a retinue of servants. Moreover she had stipulated that



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her friend's servants should be kept out of sight, and that the supper should be served by her own maid, hired and capped for the occasion. Still all of us must now and then make the best of a bad fix and everybody thought that Arabella carried off this one with a great deal of grace.

Then it really was very little noticed because of the pleasant flutter over getting the ladies settled in their proper places. There was barely room for them to squeeze between the table and the whitewashed wall, but of course that only made everybody smile and talk more gayly. And most delightful was the admiring surprise over the perfectly satisfactory manner in which these had been assigned. Hereafter there could be no further question of Arabella's knowing exactly how all social matters should be arranged. Even the new minister's aunt was pleased because she sat near the big bowl of blush-roses and could watch a tiny green creature climbing a slender stem. And the widow Wall had nothing to complain of, though it was plain to her that she was expected to fit in anywhere. She was used to taking what other people did not want, and there were



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plenty of good things to eat all along the table. Then she took great pride in the blush-roses and in knowing that the ladies would know where they came from. There were more than enough for the table. She noticed proudly that bunches of them looped back the fresh muslin curtains. Yes, her blush-roses were to be seen everywhere, even among the asparagus boughs in the fireplace. She could not help calling attention to the beauty and richness of the floral decoration but the lady to whom she spoke merely nodded rather absently. For the supper was already being served by the agitated maid, who sidled cautiously round the table keeping so close to the wall that her back was soon quite white, and holding the smoking dishes very tight in both hands. Nobody was impolite enough to notice that other black hands sometimes handed her the dishes through the kitchen door. That is nobody noticed them but old Mrs. Crabtree and she made no comment—at the time.

On the whole the entertainment could hardly have begun more favorably. And every moment seemed to make its brilliant success more secure. The last of Arabella's nervousness



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now wore off. She cast an open look of triumph across the table. And Mrs. Pottle's decided nod in response said that she thought so too. Then glancing at Phœbe who sat close by her side cooing in her ear like a dove, she nodded again as much as to say that she could never forget what Arabella was doing, and would not neglect to make a proportionate return for such service. Thereupon Arabella's naturally light heart actually danced in her bosom. She leaned back in her chair beaming in silent radiance. But she soon was reminded of duty and caution, seeing old Mrs. Crabtree cut a baiting eye over at Mother Rowan who stiffened and squared herself. Wide awake in an instant Arabella sat up very straight — so that the old ladies could not catch another glimpse of one another — and began talking so quickly and fluently that they could not get a word in edgewise. A little later she arose to lead the way back to the cool parlor, and these two ladies followed as peaceably as the gentlest of the company.

No, it was neither old Mrs. Crabtree nor Mother Rowan who broke up Arabella's tea-party, in utter rout and consternation, just as it



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was closing with undimmed brilliancy. It was Father Rowan — whom nobody had thought of in connection with the occasion — who did it. And it was the squire — likewise entirely left out — who brought the disastrous news. He came dashing up in his wife's carriage instead of his own buggy. She asked why he was doing this and so caused more confusion. As he tried to explain a black boy ran up and shouted something that set most of the ladies screaming and sent some of them wildly running up the big road. In the uproar only Mother Rowan heard what the squire said. He spoke to her in a low tone, and without a word in reply she allowed him to help her into the carriage and they drove off together.

“Well — in all my born days!” cried Mrs. Pottle in high displeasure. “Since I was created —” but she paused and turned.

Phoebe clung to her with trembling little hands. “Oh — tell me,” she implored. “What is it? Something must have happened to Father Rowan. I feel it. Please come with me and let's find out as quickly as we can. It was wrong to leave him so long. Mother Rowan didn't want to come but I persuaded her.



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And it's all my fault—I'm making mistakes every way—I'm to blame for this too—as well as all the rest."

"I shall not allow you to be blamed," said Mrs. Pottle warmly. "And I won't let you torment yourself, either. There, child! There! Maybe the boy knows. Ten to one but he's at the bottom of it whatever it is. Where *is* that little black rascal? Gone too—a-chasing after the carriage. 'Pon my word they all act as if they were crazy. Come—we'd better hurry on up to your house."

The other guests, or at least so many of them as had not run before, now walked behind at a respectful distance talking in hushed whispers as people do in the presence of some sudden calamity. When they reached Phœbe's gate they found the new minister standing there—waiting—with a very grave face.



## XVII

### CLOUDS RIFTED WITH SILVER

HE spoke to Phœbe as she ran by him toward the open door. She hardly heard and her eyes were so full of tears that she could not see. She was too intent on finding Father Rowan to notice any one else.

The new minister followed, keeping at her side to the door: "The old gentleman isn't there. He has gone. That is—but let me tell you how it was."

She stopped now more alarmed than ever.

"Don't go in. Stay out on the porch. Persuade her to sit down, Mr. Wood," said Mrs. Pottle, once more in capable control. "Then wait a moment till I send away those people. There are too many. Phœbe will be better with only you and me," she said, turning back to the gate.

The kind neighbors were still standing there



## Clouds rifted with Silver

wondering, anxious to do whatever was kindest yet uncertain whether to stay or go. But the few decisive words spoken by Mrs. Pottle started them off at once though it was plain that they resented her telling them what to do.

She cared nothing for that thinking only of Phœbe: "There now!" she said sitting down close to her side, and looking eagerly at the new minister. "Tell us all about it."

"I was sitting by my window when Mr. Rowan came out of the house," he began. "It surprised me to see him because I had understood that he could not walk alone. And he did so with difficulty by holding on to the fence. When he reached the front gate he stopped and looked quickly up and down the big road in an agitated sort of way. I thought he needed aid of some sort and hurried downstairs. But the squire came in sight just then driving home as usual at that hour and the old gentleman hailed him. I have often heard them chatting through the window and so I paused. It seemed to me that the old gentleman made some request. I saw the squire hesitate though I did not hear what he



## The Little Hills

said at first. But after a little more talk he nodded heartily and drove off saying loud enough for me to hear, that it was a pleasure to loan the horse and buggy, and that he would send them back at once — just as soon as he reached home — and with them a trusty man to drive.”

So far all was quite clear and usual, to borrow and lend being entirely in the regular order in this country where there was nothing for hire. Then it was well known how obliging the squire was to every one and that he already had a great liking for Father Rowan. It was therefore evident that his momentary hesitation must have been solely on account of this borrower’s helplessness. He had, however, thought to provide for that in sending the reliable servant.

“And he did send him — didn’t he?” urged Phœbe wringing her hands. “The squire always keeps his word. He certainly sent the man to drive and take care of Father Rowan — surely, surely the squire knew that he wasn’t able yet to take care of himself.”

“Yes,” he said. “The man helped him into the buggy most carefully and started to get in



## Clouds rifted with Silver

after him. But the old gentleman suddenly seized the reins, struck the horse with the whip — almost running over the driver — and was off and nearly out of sight before the man could jump up out of the dust. I was so taken by surprise that I didn't know what to do. When I ran to help the driver and asked what it meant, he merely shook his head — saying he must make haste to tell his master — and limped off toward home. But he had barely had time to get there when I saw the horse coming back — quietly jogging along — without the old gentleman and all that was left of the buggy was one wheel and the shafts."

Beyond this he knew no more than the others, but said what he could to comfort Phœbe. He thought that the quiet return of the horse gave reason to hope that there had been no runaway. Mrs. Pottle, hastily doing what she could too, said that it was most likely that the horse had merely pulled the hitch-rein in two after being tied and had broken the buggy by striking the fence in his haste to get to the stable. Then she added with a touch of asperity that she had warned the squire of that very thing over and over.



## The Little Hills

Those Gold-dust Morgans always were restless in harness, she went on. They hated it anyway and said so just as plainly as if they could talk. Though the finest of saddle-horses they never could bear to be hitched to any vehicle. Somehow or other they always managed to get rid of it yet they were not at all vicious. Most likely, so she argued again, this horse had simply pulled the hitch-rein in two after the old gentleman had tied him somewhere, and the buggy had been broken by coming in contact with a stump. She was quite sure that nothing serious had happened. But she suddenly thought of her husband's absence and at once said that she must hurry home. So large a place with so many retainers could not be left without a head when evening was coming on. And she got up hastily and went away, promising to come back as soon as she could.

After she had gone Phoebe paced the porch in misery that could not rest straining her eyes toward the hill over which the searchers had driven. Then she turned to the new minister and asked him to go with her to the top of the hill. Helpless waiting might not be such tor-



## Clouds rifted with Silver

ture if she could see farther off. He arose instantly and they started in silence. On the hillside he saw that her strength flagged and drew her hand to his arm and held it there — such a small hand and trembling so. It was growing late now and the last light lingered on the hilltop when they reached the summit and stood still. There were clouds lying like slender steel bars across the western windows of heaven shutting in its golden treasury. But they did not notice these slight signs of a storm and she had forgotten that her hand yet lay on his arm. Thus they stood, looking silently down the other side of the hill into a deep valley, wherein the white mists strove with the black shadows.

“How still it is,” she sighed at last. “There isn’t a living thing to be seen or heard. Those moving dark spots ’way down yonder are only small bushes swayed by the wind.” Then she shivered a little at a faint, far-off, long-drawn sound. “I wonder why we always think of trouble — and bad luck — when we hear a dog howl?”

“Perhaps it’s because he is in trouble himself and having bad luck — he doesn’t howl if he isn’t.”



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But his light tone did not win the smile that he hoped to see.

He tried again: "Or maybe the dog's howling touches some subtle chord of sympathy between the brute and the human. Yet I rather think that it reaches the superstition bred in the southern bone. I never deny that it's in the very marrow of my own. Why should I—or anybody else? It proves imagination," he said smiling. "And that's a good thing to have."

She was bending forward, gazing intently into the shadowy valley. But she shrank back, clinging closer to his arm as a bat flew by almost touching her bare head.

"See!" he cried gayly. "There is the same thing in another form. Your black nurses told you that if a bat once touched your beautiful hair, you could never get rid of it without losing some of those lovely locks."

This time she laughed a little too as if to keep from crying and she did not try to speak. She dared not trust her own voice feeling the danger of breaking down. For she had endured about as much as she was strong enough to bear. Her slight strength of mind and body



## Clouds rifted with Silver

was wholly exhausted. And her far greater strength of heart and spirit also was near failing. Both of these had been heavily taxed of late. This last and heaviest strain had drawn them quite to the breaking point. It was only by utter silence that she still kept a semblance of self-control at this moment. And now out of the whitened dimness there rose — unutterably desolate, mysterious and melancholy — the cry of a whip-poor-will. It smote her very heartstrings like a powerful touch on an overstrung harp — and set all her dumb anguish quivering into sobbing words.

“What shall I do — if — harm has come to him! The kind old man —” she said brokenly. “And I thought he was beginning to like me — and that I could make up for the wrong I had done. But this is worse. It was a mistake to bring the old people to a strange place. And I did it only to ease my conscience.”

He did not know what was in her mind, but he loved her and love can always divine somewhat. Then he was tender-hearted and could not see such piteous distress unmoved. But the little hand on his arm was fluttering as if it



## The Little Hills

might be withdrawn at any moment. And so he stood still, fearing lest she might feel the plunging of his heart against her quivering fingers.

"All the trouble has come from my own lack of moral courage," she went on more slowly much at a loss how to put her feeling into words. "I never could bear to hurt any one even when it was right. I wasn't strong enough to resist doing wrong—though I didn't want to do it—when I knew it would relieve another's pain. But—sometimes—it is so hard to tell whether you *have* a right to consult your own—" she murmured, faltering into bewildered, wordless silence.

Yet somehow, part of the truth flashed from her heart to his. He instantly understood far better than she ever could understand. It now came to him with wonderful clearness that this soft little soul was blindly trying to solve one of the greatest problems of spiritual life: that appalling problem which sets what we owe to ourselves against what we owe to some one else. None of us perhaps—not even the wisest and strongest—have ever been able to see the way in this quite clearly. Poor little Phœbe could



## Clouds rifted with Silver

only spread the wings of her spirit toward the unseen path like a storm-beaten bird flying in the dark.

Yet she was still fluttering toward the light: "For I didn't want to marry him," she said so faintly that the words were barely a sighing breath. "I never would—if there had been any other way to set his mind at rest. Oh, I couldn't—*couldn't*—if there had been the least chance of his living—poor fellow. That's just what makes it so bad." The little brown head sank very low now and she took her hand from his arm to cover her face.

It was all that he could do to keep from taking her in his strong arms and trying to soothe her like a suffering child. She looked so small and desolate and helpless standing there alone on the hilltop against the darkening sky.

"It's a sin to marry without love—even to give peace to the dying," she murmured.

He could not see her face distinctly for dusk had fallen, but there was something in her voice that made him forget caution. He took her hand and drew it within his arm and held it close. The tender, protecting clasp gave her courage and she told him the whole truth as



## The Little Hills

well as she could, as fully indeed as she understood it herself. He said nothing for some time. A sense of awe, a feeling that he stood in the presence of The Mysteries held him silent and motionless. He dared not lay hand on the rent veil of this soul's temple. Hardly might he lift his eyes to the white light that shone from it.

"For it isn't true that pity is akin to love," she said after a while.

"Others have confused the two," he said quickly. "You shouldn't reproach yourself for making a mistake that so many have made."

"But it wasn't a mistake," she said simply. "I knew better. I knew even then that love and pity were not at all the same though I didn't know what love was like."

"Do you know now?" he said still more quickly. "I hope so for I do — since I've known you."

Then he drew her softly into his arms and held her close, bending his head down till his cheek touched hers. Such a soft little cheek and so wet with tears! The deepest tenderness within him was stirred to its depths. Her



## Clouds rifted with Silver

curly head was just as high as his heart and lay against it at rest for a while. She was so utterly desolate that she could no more refuse the offer of love than a desert wanderer could resist a life-giving draught. But presently she drew away from his clinging arms with such gentleness that he let her go with a smile. There was no great need of haste now that he had only to bide his time. Then the falling of a few big drops of rain warned him that they should hasten to get under shelter. Nothing was to be gained by longer waiting and watching on the hilltop.

The rain had already driven the neighbors indoors. Only the dim lights glimmering through rarely lighted windows told of the general uneasiness. Her house was deserted but the porch was dry sheltered by the thick vines. There the lovers sat down to watch and wait — just as before ascending the heights — yet there was a great difference to them both, as there always is to all of us. She felt no less anxious, but the bitter unrest of lonely trouble had given place to the sad peace that distress finds in love's company. He felt perfectly happy forgetting that there was any cause to be other-



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wise, till she reminded him of it when he spoke of marriage. Then indeed there was something very near dislike of the old people in his heart, when she said that she could never marry him because her whole life was pledged to them. He protested — startled — saying that to care for them should henceforth be his privilege. There need be no question of means he urged. But she answered very gently and quite firmly that she could never shift her duty to other shoulders however able. The father and mother of the man whom she had married must not be dependent where they had no claim. This, she said sadly, was the very thing that he had been miserable over. To give them a claim had been her sole justification — if she had any at all — and through it they were entitled to everything that she could do so long as they should need it.



## XVIII

POOR FATHER ROWAN! POOR MOTHER ROWAN,  
TOO!

AT midnight the rain ceased and the wind went down. In the warm, still darkness it seemed as if the sweet odors from the sleeping flowers were softly astir among the wet leaves. But it was not long after the turn of the night when a faint echo came from afar and rose rapidly into the sound of approaching wheels. Phœbe was the quicker to spring up, but the minister passed her on her way to the gate. It was too dark to see what was coming. But there was only a moment's wait before they heard Mother Rowan's voice, and something in its tone relieved their worse fears though they could not hear what she said. The carriage came on very fast and soon drew up at the gate. As it stopped the squire called out:

"Who's that? If that's a man there—come here. I need a man's help. Here—round on the other side," he directed.



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Phœbe was already hanging over the wheels imploring to be told what had happened. Through the blackness she could barely make out a limp form leaning against Mother Rowan. "Oh — is that Father Rowan?" she entreated. "And is he much hurt?"

"Fetch a lantern and don't stand there a-talking and making a fuss!" cried Mother Rowan. "How do you expect us to get out — when we can't see our hands before our faces? Some people never think of anything but making a commotion. Stop all this one and fetch a lantern!"

Phœbe ran to do as she was told and ran back with the lantern lighted in great haste by her shaking fingers. But she found the squire and the minister already bearing their helpless burden through the gate and up the porch steps. She held the lantern higher to give better light, and saw Mother Rowan leading the way with her small head high in the air; and heard her throw open the chamber door without any of the gentle care that the sternest use in the presence of a real calamity. Then, when the brighter light of the lamp burning within the bedroom shone on the



## Poor Mother Rowan, Too !

strange little face and Phœbe saw the look that it wore, her alarm turned into bewilderment. She shrank silently round behind the bed on which the two men laid the old man. In silence she did what she could to help. Then when there was nothing else to do she stood with tightly clasped hands, looking uneasily from one grave face to another, anxiously seeking the truth and slowly beginning to divine it.

The minister hastily put out his hand to lead her from the room: "You are so pale and look so tired," he said gently. "Come out where it is cooler and sit down. There isn't anything more to do. Nothing that any one could do."

"Not a single thing," the squire said also looking at her. "It is best for all concerned that the old gentleman should be left in quiet to sleep off—his fatigue. It's been a hard night for him and everybody. We are all worn out."

Then he turned suddenly and looked at Mother Rowan, kindly but uncertainly. "Yet if there is the least help that we can give you, Madam," he faltered. "If we can relieve you by staying—but perhaps you know better—"

"Well, I ought to," said Mother Rowan



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shortly and with snapping eyes. "I've done it often enough. But I must say that I never expected to have to go through with the whole thing again — at my age — and him as gray as a badger — and with a broken leg to boot. Yes, I will confess I thought he was tamed at last. It never entered my head that he could walk without help, and I don't believe he would have tried to, if it hadn't been for meddling people, always so accommodating about what don't concern 'em — and always so ready to lend top-heavy buggies and skittish horses. If other folks attended to their own concerns — as strictly as I've always attended to mine — there'd be a good deal less trouble in this world. But there's no use crying over spilt milk. And I'll lay he never gets *another* chance!"

"I'll lay so too, Madam," agreed the squire heartily, bowing and backing toward the door. "I am quite sure of that."

The minister had already made his escape from the chamber. He stood in the passage that was dimly lighted by the lantern which hung on the back of a chair. When the squire now slid out of the bedroom backwards in such haste, they looked at one another and glanced



## Poor Mother Rowan, Too!

at the chamber door. Then their eyes met again and they smiled, as the best of men will smile at any open showing of another man's subjection by a woman. It made no difference that they, themselves, were at that very moment in routed retreat before the same feminine force which had subdued Father Rowan. For somehow or other no man ever does regard himself in quite the same humorous light in this delicate matter.

But the minister's smile faded quickly and he stood in troubled silence looking down at the passage floor. It distressed him that this last unbearable weight should have been added to the burden which Phœbe was struggling so hard to bear. The undertaking had been beyond her power from the first and this must make it utterly overwhelming. Yet there was a grain of comfort in his troubled perplexity. Being in love he could not help hoping that the very fact of her helplessness might plead his cause. For love that can look first at anything else than its own aim is not love at all. Later perhaps — and in the nobler natures — love may look toward self-sacrifice but it never can on first impulse. To give up self the noblest



## The Little Hills

must have time to think and thinking takes longer than feeling. So that this lover's heart suddenly leapt high with hope. She could no longer deny the need of help. No woman however strong could bear such a load as this alone. She must consent to let him lift it from her tender shoulders. In his burning eagerness to urge his fresh claim he could hardly wait till she came from the chamber. His pulses were beating fast and his eyes glowing with new light. Unconsciously he glanced at the squire with a proud lift of his head and a radiant smile. The squire also smiled, though in rather a different manner since he was thinking of something very different indeed. But both the men's faces suddenly grew very grave, and they looked down feeling ashamed of their levity, when Phœbe appeared and they saw her transparent face.

For it was only too plain that she knew the whole truth. She had divined it by degrees. This was the first time that she had ever come close to the sad sight; a sadder one than almost any of the many sad ones that wring good women's hearts; and saddest of all when seen in age — which seems to add despair. The



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very whiteness of the head on the pillow had wrung her tender heart. It moved her so deeply that she forgot to be afraid. Then her eyes were so blinded by tears that she could not see just how grimly forbidding that gaunt figure was — standing on the other side of the bed — motionless as if carven out of stone. Blindly and bravely she felt her way round the bed, and went straight to the old woman and put up her soft arms and tried to draw down the unbending neck. When she could not do that, she stood on tiptoe and pressed her sweet lips to the wrinkled cheek in wistful tenderness that would not be denied. She felt the sudden quiver that went over the tall form while she clung to it. But there was not one word to give her courage to say something in comfort and love as she longed to do. She could only let her arms drop with a helpless sigh and turn away. And so she had gone out of the silent chamber, looking back with yearning sympathy.

The minister did not find his words as ready as he had thought they would be. The squire also found himself suddenly embarrassed. It flashed across his mind that his wife would



## The Little Hills

have to know what had happened. She was ever watchful of his going and coming and never in the least backward in saying exactly what she thought of them. He flinched, remembering the amusement of the loafers who hung around the groggery at the cross-roads where the truant had been found. They had laughed as long and loud as they dared — with Mother Rowan within hearing — when he and she had tracked the artful runaway to his hiding-place among the tall iron weeds near by. All this was certainly most undignified — even ridiculous — for a man of his years and position to have been engaged in. Of course it would come to his wife's ears and she might make reference to a wild-goose chase — or even a fool's errand — on a stormy night. For one moment of panic he thought of going back to his office, daylight being now not far off, instead of driving on home. From the passage door he could see a light in one of the windows of his house and knew that his wife was up, still waiting and more than ready. Seriously he considered flight. No one is ever so much afraid of being laughed at as he who is always laughing at others. Then all of a sudden he remem-



## Poor Mother Rowan, Too !

bered how rarely his wife laughed or saw anything to laugh at. It was a great relief. Perhaps many a man has found security in his wife's slowness to see the ridiculous, and certainly not one ever loved her the less on that account. The squire now straightened up and laughed himself, a little sheepishly. Then he said that it was time to be getting home, the east was already gray with the dawn. And so he drove off with a cheerful good-night—whistling—to let the neighbors who heard him pass know that there was nothing wrong.

The minister lingered a few minutes longer. He could not bear to leave her standing there looking so tired and white, so utterly spent in flesh and spirit. Yet at the same time he knew that he must for the time forego urging his claims—his new right to help her. It was rest that she needed far more than any aid or comfort that he could give her. And he finally brought himself to go in silence and with merely a clasp of her hand. But at the parsonage gate he paused and called back wishing her sweet sleep and sweeter dreams. Then he stood still under the dripping trees to watch and wait till the lantern-light went slowly along



## The Little Hills

the front porch like a weary firefly. He saw it vanish through the shed-room door, and then the brighter light of a solitary candle shone through the climbing roses that wreathed the little white window.



## XIX

### THE RAIN ON THE ROOF

PLACING the candlestick on the chair she looked around with a long sigh. There was balm in the cool peace of the poor place. It was sweet too with the scent of the wet roses clustering around the open window. She took a deep breath of the fragrance as she sat down on the side of the little white bed, and leaning over it put out her hand toward the nearest rose. The touch was as soft as the sighing of the breeze, but it sent a startled flutter through all the dripping leaves. She drew back quickly and her sad face brightened with a smile. It was pleasant to know that the birds were there so close by, sleeping within reach of her arms. She felt less lonely at once, almost as if she had real company. Then fearing that the feathered sleepers might be disturbed by the light, she set the candle on the floor and shaded it till only



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a silvery glimmer lingered on the low white walls.

And now — still sitting on the bedside afraid to move lest she startle the birds — she began to undress very slowly and softly. But she had hardly taken off her black bodice and let down her brown hair before she forgot what she was doing, and allowed her hands to fall on her lap. And so she sat for a while dreaming rather than thinking. But with rest her mind cleared and she wondered why she was not miserable. She knew that she ought to be, that the revelation of the old man's weakness was more than enough to make her so. She fully realized what it meant and her heart was filled with pity for him and for his wife. The future looked dark indeed, her own no less than theirs. But she could not keep her thoughts on these sad facts though she tried to do so. For certainly the situation needed thinking about in order to decide upon some plan. She was utterly at a loss how to begin the next day, and there would be many other days, each harder than the other to meet and deal with. This she said to herself very sternly, yet even as she spoke her thoughts quickly turned to her



## The Rain on the Roof

own happiness, to the wonderful words that she had heard on the hilltop. Every word that her lover had spoken came back again and again, sweet and clear as the soft chiming of golden bells. The witching music lulled her sternest self-reproaches. She could only listen and wonder how she could be so happy. There was no mystery. It was merely love claiming his own first right. But she did not know much about love's selfish ways which she was only learning. She had not yet learned that when a truly loving woman loves with her whole heart and is loved to her complete content, she can never be made really unhappy by anything in this world outside her love.

And so she felt guilty because she could not help being happy — poor little thing — sitting there alone in the scented gloom, so lonely that she was wistful for the company of the birds. It was a pity that only their sleepy eyes could see her. For she was lovely to look at, with her long hair rippling down over her bare shoulders and round arms. There was a new radiance too in her soft eyes and her sweet face. For she was gazing into the framed darkness wreathed by the wet roses and saw only her



## The Little Hills

new happiness. It seemed to her like some exquisite winged thing that would fly away, if she did not clasp it quickly and hold it close. And that was what she did instantly, crossing her arms over her breast and pressing them very, very close. Then smiling at the fancy that — held thus — love could not use his wings, she nestled down among the pillows. Her shining eyes were wide open and seeing radiant visions through the white dimness.

“Oh — no — no, indeed,” she said to herself speaking aloud as the lonely often do under stress of feeling: “I mustn’t go to sleep — though I am so tired. If I were to fall asleep even for a moment — I never could tell whether this is really true — or only a beautiful dream.”

For a while she lay quite still and as perfectly happy as few of us are ever permitted to be even for so short a space. Then she stirred uneasily. It seemed to her that the exquisite winged thing fluttered a little — as if trying to get away — and she did not smile at this fancy. Instead she pressed her soft arms closer to her breast, still closer to her heart which began to ache again. Before very long she would have to let love go, even though he might not wish



## The Rain on the Roof

to get away. She had already told her lover so. His eager offer to lift the burden that kept them apart came back to her now, bringing a sudden glow like a draught of spiced wine. But in another moment she grew cold as she always did in thinking of her husband. Then all the old bewildered pain—for what she hardly understood and could not help—was tugging at her heart once more.

She turned wearily on the pillow longing for sleep, yet still looking into the darkness framed by the wet roses. At first she could see nothing now but a dark, steep path struggling up a stony hillside. But after a time it seemed to her that a light glimmered—far off and high up—and gradually shone brighter and nearer till it streamed all the way down that long road clear to her weary feet. The fancy was wonderfully heartening. She was smiling and almost at peace.

Without a moment's warning another alarm smote her like a blow. She sat up in bed gasping for breath and pressing her hands to her heart as if it were trying to escape. The squire's loss through Father Rowan's fault! That should be made good at once. The fact



## The Little Hills

that the squire himself never would speak of it could make no difference. The neighbors would all know anyway. They knew everything about one another, and Phœbe knew only too well what they would think of the least remissness in this matter—and also what they would say. For while they could, and perhaps would, overlook the old gentleman's misstep, they neither would nor could tolerate even delay in making good such a loss as this. In that country of easy borrowing and free lending this was a debt of honor.

“And they were all just beginning to like him and respect Mother Rowan,” said Phœbe to herself and almost with a groan. “Now the old people will be looked down upon. And this is what I've done by bringing them here. This is what I've done to make up.”

Then in frightened haste she began to check off the quivering little fingers of one hand with the unsteady forefinger of the other, reckoning her resources. Over and over she counted every penny that she had in the world and not another one could she make out. All must be used to give the old people even scanty comfort. Nothing could be taken away without



## The Rain on the Roof

depriving them and they had little enough at most. And yet this debt must be paid, or Father Rowan would be disgraced. Those of us who have known such people and how rigidly they exact what they think is right, can know how real was the cause of her alarm. And we who have anywhere felt the need of a few miserable dollars—to help those who are helpless save for what we can do, will know what she was suffering now. For it is then that the white-hot iron of poverty enters the very soul—and so it was searing hers at this moment.

For the first time in her life she wholly lost heart and courage. Giving way utterly she fell back on the pillows, shivering, gasping and sobbing. A great drowning flood of misery swept over her. It seemed to her anguished, fevered, tossed mind as if those weak but clinging old hands were dragging her down. She felt that she must cast them off and free herself or die. For a moment it was her life against theirs. She could not hold them up. It was no use to try. They would only drag her under. The burden had been beyond her strength from the first. She had known that all along. And now she must let it go. To



## The Little Hills

hold on would be madness. She had but to cast off those weak old hands and grasp the strong young ones that were already outstretched to save her. And she had a right to save herself. Every woman has a right to live her own life. Every soul has the right to be happy — if it can. She could, and love had been slow in coming to her. But it had come at last and she could not let it go. No — no — no! And so it raged, this fierce revolt of a soft nature driven too hard; this terrific strife between a strained conscience and a starved heart.

When her strength was spent she lay quiet, sobbing now only at long intervals. But her heavy gaze still wandered about the dim room as if seeking some unseen help, till a faint sound caused her to look toward the dark window. She did not know what the sound was at first and lifted her head to listen. It was the rain falling again; the gentle summer rain that comes without storm. Those were the first raindrops running over the roof like fairy footsteps. They made her think of a beautiful rain-spirit with light little feet, swiftly coming and going. For they fled quite



## The Rain on the Roof

out of hearing on this first flight across the low roof. But she knew that they would return before long, and listening more intently, almost ceased sobbing. Yes, there they came — stepping more slowly — tripping rather than running and they did not go quite out of hearing this time. At the edge of the mossy eaves they paused and lingered. Then they turned and came pattering back only to turn again and go on regularly pattering — pattering — pattering to and fro. The throbbing little head sank back on the pillow now, already somewhat soothed. It seemed too as if the pain in her heart were not so sharp, as if the unrest of her soul were not so great. For there is magical healing in the sound of the rain on the roof in the night. It weaves its subtlest charm over the humble dwellers under lowly roof-trees such as this one was. But it brings a measure of peace everywhere and to all. No bodily distress is ever quite so great under that peaceful murmur: no spiritual unrest can wholly resist its relief. The struggle of life seems less hard and its disappointments less bitter — wrongs sting less sharply and good deeds shine anew and afar through the deepest darkness. That



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soft wonder-working sound of the rain on the roof in the night! Phœbe's sensitive spirit responded like a harp. She was no longer sobbing, there was even a shadow of a smile on her sad little face. Tears still hung on her long lashes but they merely weighed them down the sooner. She was almost dozing already — poor little Phœbe! Hers was the gentlest and sweetest spirit, and the hardest and bitterest could not be quite so rebellious wrought upon by the charm of the rain. It had gradually fallen into a musical rhythm and she listened to it as a grieved and drowsy child listens to a lullaby. For the beautiful rain-spirit really was singing one, the softest, tenderest and most soothing too that earth's grieving and weary children were ever permitted to hear. Phœbe had quite forgotten about the light little feet pattering so close to her head. She could not hear them now. She heard only the still softer waving of its much lighter and larger wings, and felt that they were bearing her away from all earthly unrest, far beyond and above the sad mystery of living.



## XX

### PAYING THE PIPER

YET when the earliest twittering of the birds brought her back to the freshened earth, the first thing that she remembered was the debt. But the peace wrought by the rain still rested on her quiet spirit. She was not uneasy now, feeling sure that the way would open somehow. Then as she looked out over the blooming meadows where the larks were singing, she thought of her locket. That must be worth a great deal, perhaps more than the amount of the squire's loss. As soon as breakfast was over she would get out this treasure, the only piece of jewelry she had, and see at once what could be done.

But Mother Rowan did not wait till the early meal was over to broach the subject which had kept her awake also. She did not know this community with its rigid exactions, but she was born and bred to another very much like it. Then she, herself, was the im-



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personation of fierce independence. So that she spoke at once with her usual bluntness.

"Yes, indeed," assented Phœbe cheerfully. "Of course we must pay. But we mustn't let Father Rowan know."

"Why not?" demanded Mother Rowan. "Shield him? After he's cut such a scandalous caper—at his age—expecting me to put up with it at mine! I'll do nothing of the kind. I'll give him a piece of my mind—just as soon as he wakes—and nobody can keep me from doing it."

"As you think best," said Phœbe gently. "If we could only keep the neighbors from knowing!"

"I've got nothing to hide from anybody," declared Mother Rowan fiercely. "There's never been one underhand thing in my whole life. I'm always perfectly open and above board—even down to what I think. And that's the reason I tell you now that you're some to blame in this. It never would have happened if you hadn't brought us here amongst accommodating squires and nearby groggeries. I could have kept him straight if we had stayed where I knew what there was to keep watch on."



## Paying the Piper

"Yes, I am to blame. I can see it too," murmured Phœbe hanging her head.

"Well, there's no use in crying over spilt milk. But I'm not a-going to be looked down on by strangers or let him be either, if I can help it. I've lived an upright life and made him live one too, as far as I could. Then there's poor William to be thought of in this disgrace — brought on by his father — here where he was a minister of the gospel."

Phœbe turned quickly and looked through the open window.

"There are no two ways about the matter," Mother Rowan went on relentlessly. "I've been thinking most of the night how to keep him — and all of us — from being looked down on. It seems to me that the best plan would be to sell or mortgage the piece of land that he sunk my school money in, without leave or license," she said jerking her head toward the invisible culprit. "It couldn't be mortgaged or sold for much, but maybe something might be raised on it —"

"No! no!" protested Phœbe, alarmed as the country-bred always are at the mere mention of any incumbrance on land by which they and



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their forbears have lived. "You mustn't think of such a thing. I couldn't let you. It's *my* place to do whatever is done."

"*Your* place, is it?" cried Mother Rowan, her quick jealousy instantly taking fire. "And you sit there—a chit of a thing like you—and tell me to my face that you've got more right to do for William than I have? You—a perfect stranger—say that to *me*; after my taking him as a puny baby and bringing him up to be a minister in the highest standing; after my doing for him what his own mother never could have done—poor sickly, slack-twisted thing—for she didn't have the spunk to say boo to a goose. That's why *he's* so hard to manage and always will be," she said with a more fiery snapping of her black eyes and a grimmer tightening of her straight lips. "And now after all that—with poor William dead and gone—to be told that an outsider has a better right than I have earned."

Phœbe sprang up and ran round the table. A sudden recollection of the night before, when she had felt for a moment a little nearer to this unapproachable woman, gave her courage. Then there was something in the strange small



## Paying the Piper

face that moved her beyond fear. She would have put her soft arms around that stiff neck again, had she dared.

"No one ever could have a better right than yours," she entreated. "I never dreamt of claiming one half so great. All that I claim is the right to do—for his sake—what you want me to. Only tell me what it is—and I will do it as nearly as I can now and always."

"Then ask that squire to let me know the exact amount of the debt, and whether he would move back his fence—the one up yonder on the hilltop next the graveyard. When I know what it will cost to mend the buggy and whether he will sell a strip off his field, I can tell where I stand."

Shrinking silently, Phoebe went back to her seat on the other side of the table, and sat still for some time without lifting her clouded eyes. She did not understand more than the mere drift of what Mother Rowan was saying, but the remotest reference to her husband always caused her to become silent.

"Thinking it out last night, I thought maybe he might be willing to sell a strip wide enough to set up the tombstone on, if I can pay for it.



## The Little Hills

Of course I am not asking any favors. I'm never going to be beholding to anybody for anything. But when I thought of trying to sell or mortgage that land of mine, it crossed my mind that maybe I could raise money enough to buy a place for the tombstone as well as to pay this debt. The first thing though, is to find out exactly how much is owing the squire and whether he will sell the strip off his field. Then I can see about the mortgage. If I can't get enough money on it for both — of course the debt must be paid. If William has got to wait for his tombstone, I reckon he'd just as soon the money went to clear his father's name as anything else."

The curly head hung very low now and big tears were running down the flushed cheeks. The peace wrought by the rain on the roof in the night was quite gone by this time. Phœbe was wholly unstrung again. Her quivering little hands had taken fast hold on the edge of the table, grasping it hard to keep herself from springing up and running out of the room.

Had Mother Rowan looked that way perhaps she would not have been quite so harsh. But



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she was looking through the window toward the green hilltop, where the silver beech bent its supple branches down to the long grass through which the breeze sighed over three graves. Presently she continued without glancing round :

“Ask that squire this very morning. And ask him whether—if I can’t raise enough money on my land—he would sell me that strip off his field on time. I could earn the money to pay for it before a great while—just with my knitting-needles. There must be plenty of people about here needing socks and stockings. That new minister’s loon of an aunt can’t knit his—a-traipsing all over the country to chase bugs and gather weeds to sow the neighborhood. Then ten to one if that lazy aunt of yours has a whole stocking to her foot half the time, and that daughter of hers would never get one done, mooning as she does. No, there couldn’t be much doubt about my earning enough to pay for that strip of land, if that squire will give me reasonable time—asking no favors and beholding to nobody. But it must be seen to—right off the reel,” she said turning to look at her silent listener.



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Phœbe was on her way out of the room. She could not bear any more and was barely able to murmur an excuse, and so escape with some show of composure. But she did not stop till she had gone clear over to the farthest side of the garden. Here the only strife was the scolding of the birds in the blossoming clover-field just beyond the white-washed fence. It was not long before she felt calm enough to venture back to the house and managed to slip unseen into the shed-room. While walking between the borders of spice pinks she had tried to think what else she had that might be sold and could recollect nothing but the locket. She had forgotten just how many pearls were set about its worn rim of gold. But she knew that there were a great many because the row went all the way round, and she did not doubt that they were worth a good deal. When she had gone into mourning the locket had been put away in the little trunk under the foot of her narrow white bed, where her rosebud muslin and all the rest of her treasures were. She sat down on the floor and drew out the trunk, and unlocked it with the key worn on a ribbon around her



## Paying the Piper

neck. Lifting the lid she laid aside many small parcels — poor little keepsakes — that had come down to her from her mother and grandmother, wrapped in yellowed paper and tied with faded ribbons by fingers long since turned to dust. As she took up the small box containing the locket she tried to remember which grandmother it had belonged to in the first place. But that was too far back and she did not think much about it anyway. She was most anxious to count the pearls which were small and yellow yet rich and rare in her eyes. Counting she grew confident. Hillery Kibbey would sell it for her and do his best to get as much as he could. And he would not tell either. He never had been known to betray a real secret, such as this must be on Father Rowan's account, and to spare Mother Rowan's sensitive pride. The only time that he was ever known to speak of a commission at all, was when some one of the ladies hinted that he might, just to make the other ladies pleasantly envious. There never was any question of his being trusted, the trouble was to get a word with him without being seen or overheard. There were so many wanting always to confer



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with him privately and confidentially. A sudden dread lest he might leave that day before she could give him the locket caused her to spring up and run along the porch. In the corner nearest the post-office the vines were very heavy and she impetuously pushed them back, hastily leaning forward. The flowering foliage fell about her with a sparkling shower of raindrops and again the sunshine burnished her brown hair.

Thus she was seen for the first time that morning by the new minister who now came toward her across the big road. His smiling eyes told her—without the least reserve—how lovely she was. He no longer hesitated to let her know what he thought and felt. The night's sweet assurance had made him daring. The cobwebs of convention with which she had bound him and herself were cast off now forever. This new freedom was in the way he walked, in the proud lift of his head and—most of all—in the look that he gave her when he took her hand: the look that a man gives a woman when he first claims her as his own.

It brought something very like a flash to Phœbe's soft eyes. For even she—the lov-



## Paying the Piper

ing and guileless — instinctively resented and resisted for a moment as the gentlest woman always does, no matter how much she may love. The mystery of that eternal antagonism springing from the very root of life! Love itself has never been able to unroot it through all the ages.

He understood it even less than she did — as the man always does. He merely saw that the little figure in black suddenly stood very straight, that the soft eyes grew so bright that they almost flashed, that the flush on the smooth cheeks deepened exquisitely, that the delicate neck arched bewitchingly and that the rounded chin was uplifted in the most enchanting way in the world. He was not in the least alarmed by these mutinous signs, feeling armed at every point. All through the hours just gone he had been thinking intently, and the most unanswerable arguments were ranged now in his mind quite ready to lay before her. He smiled to think that she did not know how to argue at all. For he had not yet learned how little argument has to do with the conviction of a woman like Phœbe.



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"The old gentleman is better, I hope," he began, looking round to make sure that they were alone. "A good long nap seemed to be all that he needed to restore him. You see how heartlessly I speak. But indeed I've done my best to be sorry for his mishap—which gave me my opportunity—and I can't. It really wouldn't be natural for me to be sorry. No actual harm has come to him. And just see the good that's come to me! Without the old gentleman's misstep I must have gone on waiting for no earthly reason except certain overly strict notions of propriety lodged somehow in that curly head. As if we ever could be happy too soon—you foolish child! Well, you can't be miserable much longer—or keep me so—no matter how hard you try," his smiling eyes bantered her and he took her hands and held them against his breast. "You've got to marry me and very soon too. You can't help yourself. You must marry me—you see—it's your duty just for the old folks' sake."

The vines made a perfect screen and he drew her still closer: "What's this?" he said taking the locket from her hand. "An orna-



## Paying the Piper

ment! That's right," he went on with rising spirits. "So you are going to have gay feathers after this—you sober little wren. Of course you are! And let's put away that dreadful veil first of all. Yes, we *will*," he cried gayly as she tried to withdraw her hands. "Before very long I mean to see how you look in pink just the tint of your freshest spice pinks, a tint almost as exquisite as that color in your cheeks this moment. I can hardly wait to see that little brown face looking out of a cloud of rosy muslin—all ruffles and lace. It makes my head go round to think of it," and so he ran on as happy lovers do.

But she drew away and a shadow falling over her face warned him to take a graver tone.

"Last night's revelation proves it impossible for you to bear such a burden alone," he said quickly, drawing her down to a chair and seating himself beside her. "It is utterly out of the question for you to think for a moment of going on without my help. If the thing that happened last night should happen again—and men rarely alter their habits when they are old—what would you do? What *could*



## The Little Hills

you do?" Then he added artfully, "Even if it never should happen again you might do many things for the old people with my assistance that you can hardly do without it. For I do not live by my profession — only for it. There need never be any question of means for the comfort of the old people. So that you cannot stand on that point."

She smiled back at him a little sadly as she shook her head: "No comfort — no luxury — ever could reconcile Mother Rowan to dependence. It would break her heart. I have never known such fierce pride. Then — don't you see —" she said very gravely and bracing herself with a visible effort before going on, "that it was for this very reason that I was induced to — that this was my only justification — the only one I ever can have."

"You poor little thing!" he said. "What can I say to you to keep you from tormenting your blameless self? You poor little thing! I wonder how I am ever going to show you that you risk your own happiness as well as mine in trying to cling to a mere shadow of conscience."

He kept silence for a moment wondering



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what would be best to say next. For he was beginning to feel the strength of resistance lying beneath her softness, like stone under moss. Yet so far he was merely bewildered and not in the least disheartened. It seemed to him mainly a matter of waiting and that was hard enough, harder than ever after feeling so secure. And he was all the more at a loss too. This was the first time that he had come in contact with firmness like hers which always seemed to yield without ever really giving way. In his perplexity it was rather a relief when the sound of wheels caused her to run to the other end of the porch. She told him over her shoulder that the stage was coming. A few moments later it drew up before the gate and Hillery Kibbey held out a long, large envelope which looked as if it might contain some business document.

“What in the world can it be?” wondered Phoebe almost afraid to take it. She had never in her life had any letters except those which the old people had written and the one from Mother Rowan’s daughter. And so she hung back a little, quite forgetting the locket.

But Hillery Kibbey bent down from the



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driver's seat and put the letter in her hand, saying that he had brought it to her himself, because he knew there was no telling when she would get it if he did not bring it. For nobody but Arabella went regularly to the post-office every time the stage came in. And — as Hillery said — she was always too intent on her own letter from the captain to notice whether anybody else got one or not.



## XXI

### THE RELEASE OF PHŒBE

THIS letter was addressed to Father Rowan and that made Phœbe wonder still more. She would not have been quite so much surprised had it been intended for Mother Rowan. Then it bore the postmark of the remote place which they had come from and this also made her uneasy. We always expect more trouble when already troubled.

With vague dread she ran up the steps and along the passage to deliver the letter. At the closed door of the bedroom she paused and hesitated. She had not seen Father Rowan since that sad sight of him on the night before. Perhaps he was still asleep. Then it had seemed kinder to leave him alone until he should be once more himself. Yet she was afraid to delay giving him such a long, large letter as this and now knocked timidly. The door opened instantly, but only wide enough for Mother Rowan's bony, strong hand to take the letter, then Phœbe was shut out again.



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She could not help feeling disappointed, but said nothing and went back to her seat on the porch. And indeed there was hardly time to speak before the squire came in sight. To see him out of the usual hour was so startling as to make her forget everything else. She stood up fearing she knew not what, and her alarm grew as she saw him driving straight toward her gate. She also noticed that he was in his old buggy. It was the new one that had been wrecked. For a moment a thrill of fear made her feel faint. Then she felt ashamed of having thought that he could be coming about that. And as he came nearer and drew up she saw that his kind face was fairly beaming. It was easy now to see that he brought pleasant and rather exciting news. Indeed the whole air seemed all of a sudden full of agreeable excitement, though she did not catch even the drift of what he said at first. For a while her curly head seemed to whirl, but after a little she began to understand. He too had just received a letter, one written by Mother Rowan's daughter. It directed him to act as her own legal adviser and requested that he would see her mother at once, before any action could



## The Release of Phœbe

be taken in a most important matter which would be offered for urgent consideration by that same mail. Phœbe was nearly lost again in bewilderment as the squire's words lengthened into legal phrases. But she made out that somebody wanted to buy the land on Rennox Creek. Then she gathered that a company had been formed for the purpose of buying the whole tract. It gradually appeared that the oil flowing from it into the creek was very valuable for medicinal uses.

"These men seem to have tested it," the squire laughed as he spoke. "They appear to have helped themselves to as much of it as they wanted for making a thorough test. The oil has already been sold widely in the eastern cities and even in London, for external use in rheumatism and several other complaints. The demand for it has now grown until they want to buy the land in order to get the oil in large quantities."

"So they say here," said Mother Rowan from the doorway where she stood holding the open letter in her hand.

"Then you have received their offer, Madam," the squire bowed with an uneasy



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recollection of the parting on the night before.

“*He* has,” said Mother Rowan with a backward jerk of her small head. “But he’s got nothing to do with it. It’s my land—not his.”

“Your daughter has written me to that effect,” said the squire taking out his letter and opening it. “She has also written me to see you as soon as possible so that you might not be led into any hasty agreement. She says that the land has turned out to be valuable. As for what its value actually is—”

“Will they give enough for it to buy a strip off that field of yours—the one up yonder on the hilltop next the graveyard?” asked Mother Rowan with a sudden fierce eagerness.

There was a momentary silence of blank amazement. Only Phœbe understood and she could not speak, much less explain. But the new minister saw her quick shrinking and the unconscious turning of her clouded eyes, toward the distant hilltop where gleams of white marble shone through the living green. He could not express the tenderness that he



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felt, but he drew nearer her side, hoping and believing that she knew what he felt.

“My field is not for sale, Madam,” said the squire puzzled yet smiling in spite of himself at the oddity of her manner. “But if I understand this matter rightly you will be able — should you like — to buy a good many fields larger and finer than mine.”

“I’ve got no use for any fields,” declared Mother Rowan more eagerly and more fiercely if possible than before. “The only thing that I want is a strip off that one field of yours. Can’t you give a plain answer yes — or no?”

“Of course — presently —” protested the squire. “But that is a small and irrelevant matter. Your daughter urges my trying to induce you to consider immediately — before the stage goes —”

“She shan’t come between me and my duty to poor William!” that curious look of exaltation was in the strange small face now. “I never allowed her to do it while he was alive, and I’m not going to allow her to do it now when he’s dead, and this is the very last thing that I ever can do for him — to prove to



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everybody how different I am and always was —from the whole tribe of stepmothers.”

“Oh—I see,” the squire began as a dim light broke.

“No, she shan’t!” cried Mother Rowan with growing violence: “And you’d just as well save your breath too. For neither you nor anybody living can make me move one peg, till I know whether I can get room enough to set up poor William’s tombstone—if I can sell my land for enough money to pay for a place to put it—and be beholding to nobody. There now! You’ve got the word with the bark on it. Do what I want, then maybe I’ll listen to what you’ve got to say.”

There was the sudden sound of a door thrown open with a crash and a deep growl rumbled down the passage.

“And what’s it to *you*?” demanded Mother Rowan whirling round and throwing the words like stones. “What have you ever done for him to give you a right to interfere between William and me?”

The violent slamming of a door partly drowned the rest that she said.

“Certainly, certainly,” conceded the squire



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hastily. "It will give me great pleasure to have the fence moved at once. However that's a small matter —"

"Not to me!" cried Mother Rowan grimly, yet slightly appeased.

It did not take long after this to settle the business. She readily agreed to start with her husband for Rennox Creek early on the next morning. Her daughter was already there and waiting with the greatest impatience for them to come. Phœbe shyly begged that Father Rowan might stay with her until he felt more able to travel or Mother Rowan came back. But the squire said that the daughter insisted upon his coming, in order that there should be no delay or difficulty in signing the deed. Then she had also made arrangements for taking her mother and stepfather to her own home when the sale had been made. It was not right — so she had written — that they should be so far from her and living among strangers.

On the whole it was a memorable day, the most memorable that this far-off corner of the green earth ever knew. The events making it so were too marvellous for belief had not



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the squire given his word that they were actually taking place. After that there could be no more doubt that these two old people, who had been without a penny on the rising of the sun would be rich—as this country held riches—before the lingering sun went down. As it sank out of sight at last behind the misty hills, the neighbors came from their houses to roam excitedly up and down the big road, marvelling in half-hushed tones. Now and then they paused, but only for a moment to lean over a gate being too much wrought up to stand still. Even old Mrs. Crabtree who rarely left her seat by the window came as far as her own gate and stood there hailing everybody that went by. She told over and over again the wonderful story that she had heard from Mother Rowan, about the burning oil which flowed on with the river for such an incredible distance, and the awed listeners never once breathed a doubt.

Some of the more thoughtful neighbors went up to Phœbe's house and offered to help in getting the travellers ready. But Mother Rowan made short work of all interference, and Phœbe gently declined, saying that they



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did not need any assistance. Nevertheless it was with the greatest difficulty that the hair-covered trunk was finally packed. There was the most unaccountable mystery in the way Father Rowan's things disappeared as he hobbled about the room, pretending to help in the packing. It really seemed as if he were doing his best to hinder rather than to help. Indeed Mother Rowan finally taxed him with hiding his clothes. Thereupon he made no denial whatever, but hobbled back to his armchair and sat down with a growl of defiance.

Mother Rowan kneeling by the trunk looked up sharply, snapping her eyes at Phœbe: "Anybody that didn't know his ways as well as I do, would think he might be a bit more lively about going to see my daughter—considering how I've done by his son," she said.

Phœbe's little hand fell on the broad old shoulder and stilled another rumbling defiance. She bent down and looked wistfully into his overcast face. "It comforts me to know that you are not glad to go," she whispered so that Mother Rowan could not hear. Yet in another moment moved by her invincible yearning for affection, she sank down on



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her knees beside Mother Rowan thus bringing her sweet face very close to the bitter one: "And you too, dear Mother Rowan—I beg you to believe that I have tried hard to make you happy."

The small head which was bent over the trunk came up with startling quickness: "Well, I dare anybody to hint before me that you *haven't*!" Mother Rowan said.

And that was Phœbe's sole reward. After one more appealing look she stood up and went quietly on with the many things yet to do. The candles burned late in her old house that night. Indeed they glimmered later than ever known before through the low boughs that overhung the mossy roof-trees all along the big road. And the beams from the new minister's lamp lay across it in broad bands of light—binding his study to the shed-room—throughout the short, still, sweet summer night.

The sun was barely peeping over the green hills when the neighbors were up and busily astir. Everybody wanted to do something for the travellers, because it was always a pleasure to do anything for Phœbe and also because the



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occasion was so interesting that nobody wished to be left out. Even Arabella fluttered in, bringing an absurd pin-cushion with many frivolous ends of pink ribbon and the pins set in the shape of a heart, thinking it might be useful in Mother Rowan's travelling basket. Phœbe thanked her most warmly yet could not help feeling relieved that Mother Rowan's back was turned, and that the present could be put hastily out of sight. The new minister came next looking as serious as he could — being so happy — and brought a most kind message from his aunt offering Mother Rowan the great privilege of choosing a gift from her entire collection. And Mother Rowan's scornful sniff did not lessen Miss Dale's generosity in the least. None of us can do more than to offer to give that which we prize most. The widow Wall in turn tried her best to think of something to make a present of. She had only a handful of new potatoes but she cheerfully dug those with her own hands, and carried them on her thin arm — all the way up to Phœbe's, only to have Mother Rowan express a very candid opinion of cold potatoes. But the contribution most resented by that spirited



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lady was the jumble that old Mrs. Crabtree sent in her usual lazy, lavish, offhand way, maliciously topping the whole with some fine tobacco and a bottle of old bourbon.

“Ten to one that that old tartar will send it all back,” she had drawled. “But what’s the odds? You can see what she does and hear what she says, and I don’t care a rap about anything else. I’d go myself if it wasn’t so far and so hot. For I haven’t made the most of my extraordinary opportunity. It’s really too bad that she’s going away. Now notice and remember everything that she says and does. Don’t go mooning, Anne.”

As for Mrs. Pottle—that generous and magnanimous soul had been sweltering over the kitchen fire since early dawn, seeing to the perfect cooking of many delicacies and to the packing of a large basket. The squire, accidentally learning what she was busy about, said that he hardly would have supposed that she liked Mother Rowan so much. On this the squire’s lady had turned from her ardent labors long enough to say that she would gladly provide enough of the very best she had, to feed the old woman and “him too” clear



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to the ends of the earth, out of pure gratitude for their leaving that foolish child in peace.

Hillery Kibbey drove by to get this largest basket. It was safely inside the stage when he drew up in front of Phœbe's gate, cutting the widest possible swath in turning. He felt his important part in this tremendous event. It was he who had brought here these two old people, to whom this marvellous fortune had fallen as if it had dropped from the sky. Without him none of the others ever would have heard of that enchanted well flowing with liquid gold. The fullest consciousness of all this was in his bearing, in the very way that he had put on his broad-brimmed hat, to say nothing of the manner in which he sat the driver's seat and handled the reins. He hesitated a little when he reached the gate where something was said about bringing out the hair-covered trunk which he had taken into the house. Under the altered circumstances it seemed to him hardly fitting that he should get down now to fetch it. And so he sat still and told one of the squire's black boys to get it and also directed him how to tie it quite



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securely on the back of the stage. Meantime many willing hands were outstretched to help the travellers into their comfortable places. Mother Rowan rather resented the commotion, but it pleased Father Rowan so much that the embarrassment with which he made his first appearance — after the night before — was at once forgotten by everybody. He put his gray head far out of the window to nod and smile at the semicircle of smiling faces. It was hardly noticed that Mother Rowan sat still and stiff in her corner and only Phœbe, who stood close to the wheel, heard her say that she always had hated a fuss. The harsh words were lost in the sound of many kind voices bidding good-by, and inviting the travellers to come again. Arabella's cheery tones rang high saying that the captain would surely be there to receive them. Phœbe alone said nothing because she dared not trust her voice. She could not see very clearly either for her eyes were brimming with tears. But she was smiling bravely and loyally kept her face turned the way they were going, as the stage started and rumbled off down the big road. Then she stood — watching it go farther and



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farther — till the new minister gently drew her away, reminding her that it would bring bad luck to watch the old people out of sight.

He expected to stay after the others were gone but she shook her head. It was best for her to be alone for a while — so she plead. She wanted time and solitude to think over all that had happened; time to see whether her task was indeed done as it seemed to be; whether she had after all performed it to the very best of her ability; whether she really was no longer bound to live any other life than her own, as he had whispered at the very moment that the stage started; whether she was in truth quite free now to love him instead of merely letting him love her, as he had urged while the cloud of dust was still afloat; whether it could be true that not one shadow of conscience was left between them, as he said now with his lips close to hers, the instant that they were alone behind the flowering vines. And so she stood quite firm with that immovable gentleness of hers. He could not resist the pleading of those soft eyes that smiled shyly through the long lashes which were still heavy with tears. But he turned when



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halfway across the big road as if to go back, and she was tempted to call him. Then she suddenly vanished through the door, closing it after her and he heard the turning of the key in the lock.

It seemed to him that the door never would open again. He could not see it very clearly through the vines, as he sat watching and waiting beside his study window. Yet he was listening too, so intently that he must have heard the slightest sound. Then it was very still. The neighbors were gone indoors now that the sun had climbed so high in the arching blue. Only the love-song that a happy robin was singing over in the meadow, kept him from hearing even the first light footfall that might promise the opening of the door. What folly to close it! For a moment he was angry with her and suddenly stood up, meaning to put an end to this needless test of his patience. Then he remembered the still more cruel ordeal that her tender heart was undergoing before her stern conscience. The lovely, foolish little thing! He knew that he would not have loved her so tenderly had she been one bit wiser. It would be his privilege hereafter to



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guard her against her own sensibility. Never again should she suffer anything that he could shield her from. He stood up once more and started to go to her. One masterful knock on the door would induce her to open it. Then he was not so sure and, smiling rather ruefully, sat down again recalling the invincible strength of her gentle weakness. There was nothing for him to do but leave her alone as long as she wished. And so the endless hours dragged along into afternoon. Now and then he turned to look at the clock to see whether time moved at all. At last came the slow strokes of five. And he had thought the days too short in June when he had first fallen in love! In reality they were much shorter now and after a while dim purple shadows began to creep along the big road under the great trees. Then suddenly the flowering curtain that covered her front porch was softly moved. But perhaps it was only the evening breeze gently stirring the fragrant folds. Yes, it was late enough now for the evening breeze to drift down from the misty hills and waft the breath of the spice pinks beyond the old garden. Still — it might be Phœbe — and he bent for-



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ward with quickened heart-beats, trying to see through the rippling leaves and swinging flowers. Then he drew back with a sigh. There was no little figure in black sitting alone in the familiar place. Yet it was near the time when she always came out — aye! past the time. Then the first pang of doubt smote him. He wondered blankly what he would do, how he could bear it, if she should never open the door to him. And this too might be. Perhaps he had been overly sure of her love because his own was so great. Once again he turned drearily to look at the clock, but he could not see it through the gloom which the twilight was — at last — bearing into the room. For the swallows were already circling her chimney. Miserably he watched them slowly dropping down into their quiet resting-place, closer to hers than he ever might hope to come. Despairingly his gaze sank to the flowering curtain, but the dusk was so deep now that he could barely see a great white moth fluttering about the very spot in which he had hoped to sit by her side. But was it a white moth? He sprang up and ran down the stairs and out to the gate to



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make sure. There again he hesitated, still doubting. Yet surely no white moth's wings would hover so long around the same place, even though Phœbe might be near. Could it be the flutter of a white dress? With this thought he was across the big road and up the porch step and behind the flowering curtain. And there he found her — waiting in the fragrant dusk — all in white like a bride.

THE END







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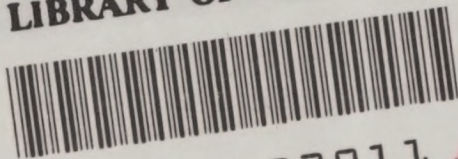
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